天地無用！魎皇鬼

無病息災編

長谷川菜穂子

イラスト　大和田直之

富士見ファンタジア文庫

Tenchi Muyo! Ryo-Ohki

Perfect Health and Freedom From Calamity

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Novel 11

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For more: visit tenchimuyotranslationblog.blogspot.com

Galaxy

It might have been a probability as slim as two comets colliding. Or perhaps it was a miracle, like the spiral of time itself unraveling.

The moment Kiyone encountered *it* was at a supermarket during the evening rush—specifically, in a side-dish section packed with shoppers.

"Kiyone-chan..."

A few days prior. Mihoshi sniffled once more, her eyes already puffy and watery from crying.

"Watch out for cars while I'm gone. Don't get into an accident. Eat your meals properly. And don't let any bad men pick you up at the karaoke box!"

"I'll be fine," Kiyone said with a laugh, rubbing Mihoshi's back. "You're the one who needs to pull it together. What kind of training is this, anyway? Calling you back to headquarters so suddenly."

"I have no idea!" Mihoshi sniffled again. "They're probably going to make me write a year's worth of reports. They'll make me recite legal codes, give me pop tests, and make me clean the shuttle over and over!"

"I'm sure that's not it." Kiyone suppressed a smirk as she wiped a tear from her partner's face with her finger. "Though... I do think you *should* probably clean the inside of the shuttle."

"See! Even Kiyone thinks so!" Fresh tears welled up in Mihoshi's bright eyes. "I'm not going to training! I'm staying with Kiyone! If the Ansible rings, tell them I've gone missing!"

"Oh, Mihoshi..." Kiyone finally burst out laughing. "It'll be okay, so don't worry. It's only for a week. Come on, wipe your eyes. I'll buy a cake and be waiting for you. I'll even book the karaoke box. So stop crying and act like a First-Class Detective."

"The cake has to be a Sachertorte from Demel," Mihoshi said, shooting her a sidelong glance.

"Yes, yes." Kiyone swallowed the urge to point out that a whole cake there cost 4,800 yen.

"And sushi before karaoke."

"Yes, yes." Kiyone’s mouth twitched slightly.

"Twenty rounds of fatty tuna, salmon roe, sea urchin, and conger eel at the counter. With Kiyone."

"Yes, yes... wait, Mihoshi!" Kiyone snapped back to reality. "Go get ready! If you keep dawdling, I’m telling Nobeyama. Now, wash your face and put your jacket on!"

"Okay..." Mihoshi finally stood up heavily. "Can I call you on the Ansible every day? Will you be there? If you aren't, I'll cry."

"I know, I know," Kiyone smiled refinedly. "I’ll be watching our usual show every night. Here, hand."

Mihoshi and Kiyone clapped their hands together in the Galaxy Police fashion and shared a bright smile.

"It’s okay. There’s nothing to worry about."

"Yeah... Kiyo-chan, sorry."

And so, Mihoshi departed for her week of training.

"It sure is quiet without Mihoshi around..."

On the first night, Kiyone muttered to herself while washing down a convenience store bento with beer. Her eyes followed the TV screen, but the content only registered in fragments. Usually, Mihoshi would be chatting noisily beside her, and Kiyone would be shouting, "Be quiet, this is the best part!"

"I don't even feel like cooking when I'm alone."

After realizing she had just spoken to the TV, Kiyone let out a long sigh. "I feel sort of... deflated."

She set down her chopsticks and drained her beer. *(Just admit you're lonely,)* the "other" Kiyone in her mind shrugged.

"What happened to 'I'll call on the Ansible every day'?" Kiyone glared at the Ansible terminal out of the corner of her eye. She should have reached HQ and settled into her room ages ago. Or did something happen...!?

"No." Kiyone shook her head to dispel the needless worry, grabbed the remote, and changed the channel.

(No dishes to wash, the futon is already laid out... I can finally get a good night's sleep for once. Maybe I'll read a mystery novel.)

Leaving the TV on, Kiyone sprawled out on the futon and picked up a popular mystery novel. *A trick like this must be elementary...* she muttered internally. However, after finishing the second chapter, she realized she hadn't absorbed a single word.

With a second sigh, she turned off the TV, went to the bathroom, and brushed her teeth.

"Alright then."

She stole a glance at the Ansible, then turned away and reopened the book. After reading two pages of Chapter Three, she kept her finger in the page and started re-reading page one. After enduring this for a while, she gave up, pulled her finger out, and tossed the book past her pillow.

It's no use... I should just go to sleep.

Kiyone got up to check the locks and the stove, then quickly turned off the lights and crawled into her futon.

Why hasn't she contacted me to say she arrived!?

She adjusted her pillow with a resentful internal grumble. "Right, sleep. Even without Mihoshi, the part-time job doesn't go away, and tomorrow is an early start."

After declaring this to her pillow, she forced her eyes shut.

The next day, while standing behind the register at "Three Stars" convenience store, Kiyone was fighting a losing battle against her yawns.

I shouldn't have watched that late-night movie... she hissed inwardly.

"Kiyone-san, you look exhausted. What's wrong? Here, have a drink." The manager, Yujiro Hoshiura, pulled a functional drink from the refrigerated case and handed it to her.

"Oh, thank you..." She took it reflexively and then bowed hurriedly. "I just couldn't sleep much last night."

"Mihoshi-san left safely, didn't she? For that training or whatever?"

"Sorry for the trouble. She'll be back at work next week."

"It’s fine, it’s fine. But man, the shop is quiet without that girl." The manager laughed and retreated to the back.

I wonder what really happened? Kiyone murmured while tidying the shelves during a break in customers. *I couldn't sleep because I was so worried... I'm going to bed early tonight!*

However, by the time her shift ended in the evening, Kiyone’s hands were full with a grocery bag and a bag from the video rental store.

"Shopping is so much easier without a glutton like you around~" she muttered toward her partner, who was currently somewhere across the galaxy.

In the end, Kiyone finished two beers while watching a video and fell asleep without even brushing her teeth. The Ansible didn't make a sound.

"Fine, whatever!"

On the third morning, Kiyone muttered indignantly. *Who was the one who said they'd call every day!? She's probably so busy she's forgotten all about me. Once that girl gets focused on something, that's it. But still, not even once...*

"Well, I guess I could just call her myself—"

She caught herself waiting for the Ansible to ring and gave a bitter smile before heading out to her job as usual. She worked her usual shift and left at the usual time.

"I wonder what video I should rent today..."

Kiyone walked into her usual supermarket, lost in thought. "I cooked rice yesterday, so..."

She scanned the somewhat unappealing side-dish section. There, amidst the housewives and office ladies buying dinner, she spotted a young man staring intently at the croquettes.

He had somewhat long black hair with a single streak of blue that looked like it had been swept in with a brush. He was wearing "Terminator-style" sunglasses, making his face hard to discern.

(What's with him? If he's hungry, he should just buy them.)

Intrigued, Kiyone decided to observe him discreetly from a short distance away. The young man picked up a pack of croquettes and glanced around. Then, the pack in his right hand vanished from his palm like magic.

"Eh!?"

Kiyone let out a small gasp and hurriedly checked the man's face. He didn't seem to notice; he picked up a pack of potato salad and let it be swallowed into his palm in the same way.

"That man...!?"

Because she was paying attention, she saw it clearly this time. By rubbing or pressing a large ring, a small gateway to a sub-space storage locker opened. The items were being stored in sub-space through that gate. It was the same principle as Mihoshi’s "Rubik's Key."

He's not from Earth!?

Kiyone moved quickly to follow the young man as he casually left the area. When he stopped in front of the bread shelf and reached for a loaf, Kiyone grabbed his right hand.

"You shouldn't do things like that."

The young man stiffened in shock and tried to shake her off, but Kiyone wouldn't let go.

"Galactic Standard... Who are you!?"

"Hand them over." Instead of answering, Kiyone thrust out her other hand.

"The Items in your sub-space storage locker. If we keep arguing here, it's going to cause a scene," Kiyone whispered sharply.

She snatched the pack of croquettes and potato salad from the young man's hands. With a bright, feigned smile, she tossed them into her basket, grabbed a loaf of bread for herself, and headed straight for the register.

"Y-you...!?"

Now it was the young man's turn to follow her in a panic. Kiyone didn't say a word until she had paid, left the supermarket, and reached a deserted park.

"Here you go, Mr. Thief." She handed over the food she had legitimately purchased.

"I don't accept charity." The young man looked back at Kiyone with a huff, trying to push the grocery bag back at her.

"Charity? Excuse me, who do you think you're being so high and mighty with...?" *Can't you just accept a person's kindness?* she cursed inwardly.

"Would you prefer being a thief? Did you want me to take you straight to the police? Besides, you haven't even told me your name... Let me see your face! Your face!"

With a burst of momentum, she snatched away his sunglasses.

"Ah..."

A miracle stood before Kiyone. It was the physique she had cheered for countless times at live concerts—a body seemingly favored by the goddess of beauty. It was the face of the voice she had hummed along to over and over, a voice that remained burned into the depths of her soul.

"Shion—you're Shion, aren't you? The star singer. I... I loved your songs. *'Turning the Galaxy into a Bouquet for You'*... I still remember it. Why did you dye your hair black? It used to be such a beautiful light blue. Why are you here stealing things? What happened?"

"...Could I have my sunglasses back?" Shion finally found an opening to speak and held out his hand.

"Oh! Ah... these? Sorry." Kiyone turned red as she returned the sunglasses, then respectfully handed him the grocery bag again. "It's a present. Is that okay? Think of it as a bouquet from a fan. Please!"

Shion stared intently at Kiyone’s face for a moment. He put his sunglasses back on, took the bag, and reached inside. He began to eat the bread as if tearing at it.

"...Water. Do you know where I can find something to drink?"

Kiyone, who had been staring blankly at the star singer, snapped back to her senses. "Water, right. Water. Let’s see..." She glanced toward a small drinking fountain, but then she pressed her lips together and took the grocery bag back from Shion’s hand.

"Why don't you come to my place? I’ll brew you some Earth-grown coffee."

She cut him off before he could protest and started walking, looking back over her shoulder. "You're curious about who I am, aren't you?"

It was Kiyone's ultimate gamble. Shion let out a smile that seemed to radiate an aura.

"Please, come in. Oh, sorry, but you take your shoes off there."

Glad I cleaned up... Feeling relieved, she had Shion sit at the table and turned on the TV. "I don't know if you'll understand it, but watch some TV while you wait. I'll brew the coffee now."

Shion looked around the room restlessly, but his eyes stopped on the Ansible. There was a tiny logo on the bottom of the monitor that looked just like a PC.

"Galaxy Police..."

Ten minutes later, when Kiyone returned with sandwiches and coffee, Shion was leaning against the wall watching TV, his long legs stretched out as if the room were too small for them.

"I hope this is to your taste... it's better than gnawing on plain bread, right?"

"Thank you, Detective."

Kiyone froze for a second in shock, then flashed a grin. "The Ansible, right. Exactly. But don't worry. I don't know what your reasons are, but right now, I'm just a fan."

"You're quite good at handling things. Men, and food." Shion's smile made the shabby apartment feel like it was glowing.

"Earth's flavors should be familiar to someone from Natsuboshi. The food culture is very similar to the western regions here. Though, I don't think my coffee can compare to the kind your brother used to brew."

" and you are?..." Now it was Shion's turn to be stunned.

"My name is Kiyone. I know all about you. Born in a small town on Natsuboshi, debuted at fifteen. With that beautiful voice and face, you became a star singer known across the galaxy. You have three siblings. Since you left home to tour the galaxy in a caravan, you haven't seen them in years. You once said you wanted to drink the coffee your brother brewed just one more time."

"You saw the live broadcast." Shion reached for a sandwich, then pushed the plate away as if realizing something. "You aren't eating anything. You must be hungry."

"Yes, I'm about to collapse," Kiyone shot back with a smile. "Just kidding. My heart is so full from this luck that my head is spinning."

It wasn't a broadcast. I saw you with my own eyes. I ditched class to follow your caravan. Long before I ever came to this planet...

She swallowed the words that threatened to overflow and sipped her hot coffee. Saying those things wouldn't achieve anything. To him, she was just one fan among tens of millions. *But please, please don't let this miracle vanish! Don't let him notice how my heart has suddenly regressed to my teenage years...!*

"I want to see you eat," Shion said firmly, then took a sip of coffee. "It smells wonderful. I didn't expect to drink coffee in a place like this."

"So, you didn't plan on coming here?"

Shion paused for a moment, a smile like a faint ray of sunlight crossing his face. "You’re sharp. But I won't answer until you eat."

"Fine. This side is mine, that side is yours. Is that okay?" To reassure him, she popped a piece of sandwich into her mouth.

"I thought we were going to have a standoff," Shion laughed, reaching for the plate. "Exactly three days ago, my cruiser and a Galaxy Police shuttle had a near-miss."

Shion began to speak slowly.

"It was right after I warped out. I reflexively performed a scramble warp to loop around the back of the shuttle. When I warped out again, there was a blue planet in front of me. The shuttle's course coordinates were still in my data, so I knew it had launched from this planet. It was only after that I realized the shockwave from the near-miss and the strain of the scramble warp had cracked the hull, ruining almost all my food stores."

It was Mihoshi...!

Kiyone instinctively clenched her hands under the table.

"I had no food or water. I realized repairs would take four or five days. On the first day, I docked the cruiser in sub-space and checked the damage. By the

second day, even the tiny bit of water I had left was gone, so I rushed the repairs as much as I could. I knew I wouldn't last if I didn't descend to the surface. I'd heard stories of Earth being a Juraian Royal Colony, so I didn't hesitate to land. And on the third day, I met you."

"I see..." *One coincidence after another—Mihoshi, how could you have a near-miss with such a beautiful star!?* In her mind, she showered Mihoshi with a misplaced rain of kisses.

"Was the person on that shuttle your colleague?"

"Y-yes. That's right..." Kiyone nodded as her mind raced. *This is going to be a compensation issue...* she sighed inwardly. "I'll have to file a report. Please submit a damage claim."

What a dull conversation to be having in front of my idol, Kiyone thought, nearly losing heart, but she held her ground. *I'm a detective, I'm older than him, and I have to act like a mature woman who doesn't believe in miracles. He is the galaxy shining in the sky, a whimsical star who just happened to stop by on the ground.*

"It's fine," Shion replied simply, seemingly unaware of her internal conflict. "The shuttle your colleague encountered was a ghost ship. It was just a near-miss; there was no accident. There's no need to search for a missing vessel."

"Shion, what do you mean?" She asked, surprised by the turn of the conversation.

"Because I'm a person who isn't supposed to be here." Shion finished his coffee, stood up, and held out his hand. "Thank you, Kiyone-san. I won't forget your kindness."

"Eh?"

Shion took Kiyone's hand and squeezed it firmly for a moment. "The cruiser should be operational by tomorrow. I'm sorry I can't give you anything in return, but I was happy to meet you."

With a shadow-tinged smile, Shion turned to leave through the front door.

Oh, he’s leaving... He’s never coming back! He’ll go back to being a star singer, and I’ll go back to being just a First-Class Detective. He’s going to a height in the sky where my voice can’t even reach...!

"Wait!"

Before she could think, Kiyone’s hand grabbed Shion’s arm. "...Stay here. Please."

"Kiyone-san—?"

Shion turned back and slowly, hesitantly, removed his sunglasses. *How beautiful... those deep indigo eyes.*

For a moment, as Kiyone felt a numbing happiness in her core, a memory flashed through her mind. The prince of the dark world with misty purple eyes, Azrael—

Wait, am I just a sucker for handsome guys...?

"Thank you." Shion, still draped in his radiant aura, gave a shimmering smile.

"That's weird... why isn't she picking up, Kiyone-chan?"

Mihoshi had been tilting her head in front of the Ansible terminal for a while now. She wasn't at the Galaxy Police HQ terminal. She was at the poolside of her grandfather’s private residence.

Mihoshi’s grandfather is the Commander of the Galaxy Police, a man whose name is known throughout the galaxy and who has made many a criminal tremble. But here, he was just an old man doting on his granddaughter.

"Hey, Mihoshi! Are you working? I took the whole day off today, so why don't you relax more?" Commander Kuramitsu shouted cheerfully from inside the pool.

"Okay~!" After giving a brief reply, Mihoshi set the Ansible number again. There was still no response.

"Oh, Grandfather..." she murmured. *Calling me here on the pretext of "training"... I can't exactly tell Kiyone that I'm just massaging his shoulders and*

listening to his old stories every day. What am I supposed to say if she asks how the training went?

It seemed the truth was that Commander Kuramitsu simply wanted to see his granddaughter's face and used "training" as an excuse to summon her. Consequently, as soon as Mihoshi arrived at HQ, she was whisked away to eat at famous restaurants, chat with parents, siblings, and relatives who also worked for the GP, and endure a whirlwind of nightly banquets.

"I wonder how Kiyone is doing. She's probably mad..." *I told her I'd call every day, but I haven't been able to at all. She's definitely mad.* That guilt only added to her anxiety.

"Mihoshi! For dinner, do you want 20,000-year-old Juraian Royal Court cuisine, or the #1 restaurant for couples? There's also the restaurant the Galaxy Police Council uses." Before she knew it, Commander Kuramitsu had climbed out of the pool and was peering over her shoulder at the Ansible.

"I... I want to eat Earth ramen with Kiyone," Mihoshi blurted out, her unfilial (or in this case, un-grand-filial) wish making her grandfather groan. "I'm very, very happy to see you after so long, Grandfather, but I'm worried about Kiyone."

"I see. My apologies then." Commander Kuramitsu looked intently at his granddaughter's face. "I suppose you have your own life now. So, which place do you want?" Like Mihoshi, her grandfather was not easily discouraged.

At that same time, Kiyone was gazing at the star-filled sky with Shion. Atop the small hill where she had once come to eat lunch with Mihoshi, a faint, misty galaxy stretched across the heavens.

"I'm sorry. I... when I thought you were leaving, I just couldn't stand it... It's okay if you want to go back to your cruiser."

Shion shook his head. "I'm sorry I didn't notice your feelings. I was so wrapped up in my own problems—even though such a beautiful flower was blooming at my feet."

"I'm not a beautiful flower," Kiyone blushed like a young girl. "I'm just a detective. I'm stationed in the frontier, and I have to work part-time every day

just to live on this planet. My partner left for training and I was lonely... I'm the one being selfish."

Kiyone stole a glance at Shion's profile. *No, that's a lie too...* She bit back the bittersweet feeling in her heart. *The truth is, I want to follow you with all my heart and soul. I don't need my career as a detective, I don't need a future, I don't even need a wedding dress. If only I could be by your side... if only you'd say the words: "Come with me!"*

But she knew that wouldn't happen. To Shion, she was just a slightly kind woman he had met tonight. One of the tens of millions of fans he used to have. She knew she couldn't actually go with him. She knew it, but her chest still ached.

"Hey, Shion. Why did you come here? Are you on vacation in the frontier?" She tried to ask brightly, like casual small talk, making it okay even if he gave a fake answer.

"..." Shion's face darkened, and he averted his gaze. "That's right. I took an eternal vacation. Six months ago."

"Eh!?"

"I stopped singing. It's too painful; I can't sing anymore. What's the point of singing when your feelings don't reach anyone, when you aren't accepted...? When I thought that, my voice truly stopped coming out. If I can't hit the high tones, I can't sing my songs. I don't even have any commercial value anymore."

"That can't be..." Kiyone's eyes widened. Since coming here, she hadn't been able to keep up with news, but she had assumed Shion's songs were still playing all over the galaxy. She never dreamed he had quit.

"Disappointed? I don't even have a job now. I'm just a homeless wanderer drifting from star to star, roaming the galaxy."

"Shion..."

Shion smiled sadly. "It's fine. It's not your fault you didn't know."

"No, it's not that. You went through something so painful, and I—" *What should I say? I can't comfort him. I don't know anything about his suffering...*

"Why? Why do you think your feelings don't reach anyone? They reached my heart. They're still shining there even now. You were the only one who could sing songs like that. How can someone with that much talent just stop singing?"

"You wouldn't understand," Shion whispered painfully. He stood up and brushed the dirt off his clothes. "Don't ask anymore. Goodbye... I had fun tonight."

As Shion turned his back, it looked to Kiyone as if his aura was fading away.

"Wait! Don't run away!" Kiyone shouted, hardly knowing what she was saying. "Are you just going to keep running? Are you going to live your life with the song in your heart locked away? Are you going to abandon all the fans who lit their hearts with your music? Even if you can't sing, you can still write such beautiful songs, can't you?"

"For what? For you?" Shion turned around. His deep indigo eyes held a spark of irritation. "How can you step into my heart like that when you don't even know me? I'm not a star singer anymore. I've forgotten the songs."

"Remember them. For me." Kiyone stood up, clenching her trembling fingers behind her back. "If you can't remember, I'll sing for you—for you."

> *Thousands of stars are watching Tonight, I'll turn the galaxy into a bouquet and give it to you So that I can wrap my arms around you As you tremble with sadness*

Kiyone's voice was raspy and her pitch wavered; it sounded nothing like Shion's clear voice. But that was fine, she thought. If she could just provoke the Shion who was hiding his irritation behind empty words of gratitude.

> *Thousands of stars are fading Tonight, I'll turn the galaxy into a bouquet and give it to you So that my heart can reach you Now that you've lost love*

"This is where the sound of the crystal harp comes in. The strings creep in... rising like a wave. Like waves that keep crashing and crashing, I felt the small courage inside me gradually growing larger. 'I mustn't lose. If I keep wishing, my feelings will surely reach them'—that's how I felt."

Tears welled in Kiyone’s eyes. *Actually, it wasn't like that. Back in school... I kept wishing, and when I finally worked up the courage to try, I crashed and burned. The first person I ever liked already had someone else they loved...*

> *No matter how long the road If you keep walking, you’ll surely see it The world that continues beyond the sky The star that shines beyond the stars*
>
> *Tonight, I’ll give the galaxy to you as a bouquet So that by being by your side Your sadness may be healed*

"Smile, Shion. Show me that smile you had back then, glowing while surrounded by applause after a concert."

Kiyone tried to continue the song, but her tears betrayed her resolve.

"That's enough. It's enough!" Suddenly, Shion’s arms wrapped around Kiyone. "I’m sorry. It must have been hard for you. I made you feel such pain."

"It's not me. You're the one who is suffering." Ashamed of her tears, Kiyone buried her face in Shion’s chest. "I just... I wanted to give it back to you. The radiance I received from you..."

Shion said nothing, stroking Kiyone’s sleek hair over and over. "Thank you. I received it—your heart."

In that moment, Kiyone was certain she saw it: the light of the galaxy shining overhead enveloping Shion...

Twice the next night, and three times the night after that. On the fifth day, the Ansible finally connected. On the other end, Mihoshi was already tearing up.

"Kiyone-chan... where were you? I was so, so worried, I was thinking about coming home!"

"Sorry, sorry. I kept waiting and waiting for the Ansible to ring, so I went out for a bit too."

"Ehh~? Karaoke by yourself??" Mihoshi’s eyes went wide on the screen.

"No. I went to see a movie."

"Oh, I see! Sorry, and I’m the one who said I’d call every day." Mihoshi rubbed her eyes, and her face immediately returned to its usual sunny smile. "I'll bring back souvenirs! Some of those terrible chocolates from the Galaxy Police commissary and the complete match records for Super Dodgeball. Nostalgic, right?"

"Yeah, nostalgic. I’ll look forward to it." Kiyone waved the receipt from Demel so Mihoshi could see it on the screen. "I've sealed it in the fridge until you get back."

"Thank you! Love you, Kiyo-chan!" Mihoshi’s smile was practically melting with joy.

After cutting the Ansible connection, Kiyone smiled to herself. *(You're wrong... The truth is, I met a star shining in the sky.)*

That single time he held her was the first and the last. Kiyone didn't ask—couldn't ask—who it was that he loved so much it drove him to despair and stole his voice. On his repaired cruiser, Shion had set off once more for the far reaches of the galaxy. *(I wanted to give him more, but he’d only let me buy him one day's worth of food and water.)*

Kiyone’s chest suddenly tightened with warmth. Someday, surely, Shion’s singing voice would fill the galaxy again. She just had to believe in that. After all, Shion hadn't said goodbye.

"Thank you," he had said with a smile. "I'm going now. Someday, I'll surely come back to repay the debt."

I'll be waiting, Shion... Kiyone whispered. Waiting for a single petal of a melody to spill from that bouquet down to this earth— Clinging to that secret, glowing with a tiny radiance, Kiyone gently closed her eyes.

SUBJECT... "untitled"

Kiyone... I am writing this now in a small tavern on a distant, lonely planet. A world I only stopped at for supplies after repeated sub-space jumps. In this bar near the spaceport, the patrons are all rough-looking aliens or outlaws. A

sign hangs out front in Galactic Standard reading "Lamed's Bar," though of course, you wouldn't know it.

As I drink the house original, a "Topaz," I look up and the greenery of Earth comes to mind. Only twenty-four hours ago, I was sitting with you on that green hill looking up at the galaxy. I heard you sing my song, and I saw the tears shining in your eyes. Sitting here blankly, listening to the popular songs of this planet, it all feels like a dream. Despite the surrounding din and the shady dealings, a mournful melody is playing—perhaps the owner's personal taste.

But to me, this desolate atmosphere is strangely comforting. Perhaps it is this cheap melody that heals me, one who has abandoned song. Kiyone... why am I writing this email that I have no intention of sending? I don't even know your Ansible number.

Perhaps it's because your tears dampened my ash-like heart, if only a little. Just as a blessed rain falls upon parched earth, will greenery sprout in the wasteland of my heart? Will spring eventually come? When I reflexively held you, your body was so warm. Thinking of that warmth makes me feel as if no amount of alcohol will ever be enough. This is my fourth glass... Feeling the Topaz slide down, burning my throat, I close my eyes and listen to the voice in my heart.

> *Crossing the distant sea of stars I return the kiss To your green hills, to your overflowing springs*

It's strange... When I think of you, a new song peeks out from the bottom of my heart. Like an unwanted child, timidly, with pleading eyes. You said it, didn't you? "Are you just going to keep running? Are you going to live your life with the song in your heart locked away?"

I certainly have been doing that. I was trying to abandon the small child struggling to get out of my heart. I looked away so I wouldn't see. Kiyone... I might still be no good. I might still kill this tiny, newborn hope. But I won't look away anymore. Even if my voice never returns, I will watch over this small song born within me. So that someday... I can deliver a song to the green planet where you are. Even if it isn't me singing, if it's you, I'm sure...

The lights of the control tower are blurring outside the window. Goodnight, Kiyone. With your warmth in my chest, I'll have just one more Topaz. Praying for your happiness from the edge of the galaxy...

Autumn Leaf Hunting

Tenchi was hurrying home through a sudden, torrential downpour. He clicked his tongue inwardly, realizing his mistake: jumping onto the bus after leaving a friend's house without checking how much change was in his wallet. He'd been forced to get off far ahead of the stop nearest his house, and to make matters worse, the sky had opened up.

He had exactly fourteen yen. He could have used the remaining ten yen to call home from a payphone, but for some reason, the thought hadn't even crossed his mind before he started walking briskly. Part of the frustration was that he couldn't find the thousand-yen bill he was sure he'd folded and set aside.

"Damn it..." Tenchi muttered a curse he rarely used and started up the mountain path. It would take at least thirty minutes to get home. Being soaked was inevitable now; he was already as wet as if he'd taken a shower fully clothed.

"I should have stayed on the bus..." If he'd pleaded his case, the driver might have let the short fare slide. Tenchi looked up resentfully at the dark sky and hurried along, hugging his wet shoulders. The November rain was cold. The sky, which should have held a faint, ink-wash brightness, was being swallowed by a dominating darkness.

A glance at his watch showed it was nearly six o'clock. By now, Sasami-chan would be starting dinner. Ayeka and Ryoko would be at the house, likely watching TV while waiting for the food. "It would be so convenient if I could teleport like Ryoko..."

As Tenchi paused at a fork in the road, a car splashed past him, sending up a spray of water. The right path followed the bus route and was a bit of a detour. Tenchi hesitated for a second but veered left, picking up his pace. It was a shortcut he rarely used, but he wasn't in a position to be picky. He just wanted to get home, take a hot bath, and eat.

"I really have no luck," he muttered, as if sealing his own fate, and hurried on. If it weren't raining, and if it weren't so late, the autumn leaves would have

been beautiful. But on both sides of the path leading down toward the stream, the trees stood colorless, sunken in shadow, rustling under the beating rain.

Once I cross that bridge, it's just a little further... Through the rain, he could hear the sound of the rapid current gnawing at the rocks. As he started down the long, curving slope, Tenchi remembered something unpleasant. Years ago... before he had even met Ryoko... someone had died here.

It was a young woman, not a local. Though the bridge was small, it was a sturdy concrete structure. To jump, one would have to climb over the railing. The story was that it was a suicide; the incident had buzzed through the neighboring villages for a while before being slowly forgotten.

The rumors had resurfaced about a year later—during the season when the mountains were dyed in brocade colors. As the short autumn days faded, a woman in a soft, leaf-colored dress could be seen on the bridge, gazing entranced at the autumn colors. Just as someone would set foot on the bridge, her figure would vanish, and maple leaves would flutter down in her wake. It was said that if she turned around, her face was so white it stood out in the twilight, making one's legs freeze in terror.

Tenchi had completely forgotten the ghost story—one of those tales of uncertain truth about a bridge he normally had no reason to cross. "No way..." Tenchi muttered, dropping his gaze and quickening his pace to shut out the unease.

It was just as he stepped onto the foot of the bridge. Suddenly, the surroundings brightened, and the sound of the rain seemed to vanish. Startled, he looked up. Just three meters away, in the center of the bridge, was the silhouette of a woman. A young woman in a pale blue kimono with a white cherry blossom sash, her back to him. In a world where all sound had died, the woman slowly turned around.

"Mom!?" *It can't be... why here...?*

"Tenchi." Soft autumn sunlight illuminated the face of Achika as she smiled warmly. "What's wrong? I came all this way to see you."

"Mom...? Is it really you?" The ghost story of uncertain truth flashed through Tenchi's mind.

"What are you saying? Have you forgotten your mother's face?" Achika laughed as if amused, then tilted her head back to look up at the trees dyed in brocade. "Cherry blossoms are nice, but the autumn leaves are lovely too... don't you think?"

As if summoned by her words, a maple leaf fluttered down. Despite there being no sign of a breeze, the leaves continued to fall, weaving a carpet of brocade at Achika’s feet. "Look, Tenchi. Even on the river's surface..." Achika frolicked like a child, leaning far over the railing to catch the leaves slipping through her fingers.

"Mom!!" Instead of shouting "Watch out!", Tenchi was already running. "Mom, what are you doing?"

"Look, I caught one!" It was the moment Tenchi caught Achika in his arms. Suddenly, the ground beneath him seemed to give way, and Achika’s form vanished. "Waaaaaaahhhhhh!!" In an instant, the autumn sunlight and the glowing leaves disappeared, and Tenchi fell as if being sucked into the dark surface of the water.

How much time had passed? The faint scent of incense reached Tenchi’s nostrils. "Huh...?" Slowly opening his eyes, he saw shadows flickering on a ceiling made of cypress.

I... I definitely fell, didn't I...?

Despite that, there was no sensation of being wet, and no pain. It was over ten meters from the bridge to the water... there was no way he could be unharmed, yet he had no memory of the impact. Or had someone saved him?

"Mom!?" Tenchi bolted upright and turned toward the light. For a second, he saw a vivid brocade pattern slide off his chest. Looking back, he realized it was a kimono with a maple leaf pattern. Someone had indeed draped it over him.

"Are you awake?" A voice slightly tinged with a smile spoke, and a woman appeared in the candlelight. She looked to be in her early twenties; her slender face, illuminated by the flickering flame, was unfamiliar to him.

"Where am I...?" Tenchi’s hand gripped the covering.

"It is called *karaori*," she said. As the woman’s red lips curled into a smile, a dense fragrance of chrysanthemums wafted through the air. Her refined, pale face looked unearthly, and neither the silver-leafed robe nor the crimson trousers she wore seemed to belong to this era.

"Please, make yourself comfortable. The rain is still falling, so it would be best to take shelter for a while longer." The woman turned her head away and brought out a vermilion-lacquered tray from the shadows. "Come here. Let me offer you a cup." As she held her sleeve and twisted her body, the silver leaf on her robe shimmered like the scales of a snake.

"I..."

"Come, have a cup." Feeling a cold shiver deep within him, Tenchi felt himself drawn in by some irresistible force. In the offered cup, a dull moon of silver foil gleamed; when the sake was poured, it became a moon floating on the water's surface.

"Go on." Urged by the woman’s dark, wet eyes, Tenchi drained the cup. The sake he tasted had the same dense chrysanthemum scent as the woman’s smile.

"Is it to your liking?" The woman smiled again and refilled his cup.

"You are..."

"I am called Kuchiba."

"Kuchiba...?" After a second and third cup, the core of his head began to feel numb. "This place... did you save me?" The woman who called herself Kuchiba didn't answer; she only laughed.

"A passing shower’s shelter, pausing in the shade of a tree, sharing sake from the same river's flow..." She whispered the words as if singing a low song, then slid closer to Tenchi. "What troubles you so? In the end, the world is defined by transience. Whether cherry blossoms scatter in a spring storm or autumn leaves hasten to fall in a cold drizzle, it is fate. So, for tonight at least, cast aside your worries."

The woman’s white fingers flashed in the light, and the cup was filled once more. "This is the chrysanthemum sake of the mountain path. Is our meeting not a sign of fate? Come, drink more. Look, your forehead is so cold..."

The moment her fingers touched his forehead, his vision went dark. For an instant, the sound of water gnawing at rocks struck his ears. "You..." Tenchi felt the cup slip from his hand, wetting his lap—or so he thought. He felt nothing. The sensation in his lower body was already gone, as if frozen, and it was all he could do to think of raising his hand to push her away.

"What did you do...?"

"You are a fine boy." The woman’s tone changed. Before he realized he was slumping over, her face was peering down at him from directly above. "You possess a strange power. A power enough to tear through the stars. Yet your form is no different from an ordinary human. Even if it weren't me, a single push would make you vanish. Like this..."

The woman’s hot hand covered Tenchi’s nose and mouth. "Just be still for a moment. Tell me, Tenchi. For what purpose do you live? Possessing such power within you, yet merely entrusting yourself to the current like a leaf floating on the river? If that is the case, it is no great loss if I eat your life."

The woman’s nails dug into Tenchi’s cheek. Her refined, beautiful face remained, but her eyes alone glowed with a chilling golden light.

An ogre...!? (Oni...!?)

Ryoko’s golden eyes flashed through Tenchi’s mind. *Why does she know my name? Why my mother's face? Did she show me a vision just to kill me?*

"Ugh..." Tenchi groaned, lifting his numb, unmoving hand in a desperate attempt to pull her hand away. Already, his entire body was losing all sensation.

"Do you hate to die? Do you hate to be eaten?" The woman’s red mouth split open, and she applied pressure as if mocking him. His breath caught, and a mist covered his vision.

"Mo... m..."

Suddenly, a shadow in his heart whispered: *It’s okay to just let go now.* Just close your eyes and relax. If you do, the pain will stop instantly. You can go to where Mom is. Just give this useless power to the ogre.

It would be lonely to die without seeing Ryoko and the others who are waiting for my return, but if I’m gone, everyone will probably just go back to where they came from. Everything will simply return to how it was before it all began. If I disappear... the story ends, too.

Like a reckless car striking someone from behind just after they've said goodbye with a promise for tomorrow, stories are always cut short abruptly like this. If that is what destiny is, what use is my power anyway...?

"Boring."

Suddenly, the woman’s hand released him. Icy air, sharp as a blade, rushed into his lungs. Tenchi wheezed and coughed violently. The sound of water striking his ears and the spray hitting his cheeks awakened his remaining senses. He really had fallen.

With half his body submerged in the freezing riverbed and the other half exposed against the rocks, Tenchi lay on his back in the darkness beneath the bridge. The driving rain soaked his already chilled, numb body, threatening to pull him into the dense gloom.

"How dull. I thought you were a fine boy, but your soul isn't even worth my effort to eat. If I leave you here on this riverbed to rot, the freshwater crabs will eventually feast on your flesh."

The woman drifted away from Tenchi, rising into the air as she was enveloped in crimson flames.

"Wait..." Tenchi instinctively tried to grab her robes. "Wait... please, wait!" It was all he could do to move a single finger. "Don't go... help me. I..."

His consciousness grew hazy; the woman’s figure blurred. Now that death had become a reality, his chest tightened with grief. "I don’t want to die. I don’t want to die yet. I still..."

He tried to say *I haven't done anything yet*, but his voice failed him. *I’ll do anything, I’ll give you anything. I’ll even give you my power in exchange for my life*. It’s something I don’t need anyway. It’s the power left to me by my

mother, but if I can live to wake up once more to the sound of birds singing at dawn, if I can see the sun setting behind the mountains... if I can see Ryoko and the others waiting for me.

"How pitiful," the woman whispered, as if singing to a small child. "Human beings... unless they look upon the road to the Underworld with their own eyes, they do not understand the meaning of life. Though I am a nameless ogre, a heart hotter than yours burns within this breast. O weak-hearted boy, do you cling to an ogre? Do you cling to the mercy of the very ogre who sought to devour you?"

Above Tenchi, the woman's pale face looked down with a semblance of kindness. "Then I shall show you mercy. I shall send you to the Underworld amidst the remnants of a dream."

The woman looked up and swept her sleeves; crimson flames danced.

> *Unbearable autumn leaves, upon the mossy ground, Unbearable autumn leaves, upon the mossy ground, Again the cool breeze, in the fading sky, The rain pours down, of the night storm, In the desolate mountain shadows, In a slumber while waiting for the moon, The sleeve I spread as a pillow is deep with dew, Pray, do not wake from the dream, Pray, do not wake from the dream.*

As the woman danced, the flames surrounding her flickered like autumn leaves, reflecting on the water's surface. Was it an illusion that the rain had stopped and a brilliant, cold moon had appeared through the clouds? The woman's form was bathed in a single beam of moonlight, looking like the incarnation of a deity. Was she a god leading him to the Underworld accompanied by the scent of chrysanthemums, or was she an ogre?

Tenchi no longer had the strength to speak; he simply watched the dance. As he faced the end of a life that hadn't even reached twenty years, the sight was hauntingly beautiful and terrifying.

"Ryoko..." Tenchi's lips moved, and a raspy voice escaped. "It's beautiful... I wanted to show this to you..."

Ryoko’s piercing eyes drifted through Tenchi’s mind. The Ryoko who appeared in his fading consciousness was laughing vibrantly—as if she were so happy and full of joy just to be living on this planet.

"Ryoko..." Tenchi called her name as if cherishing his only treasure. *That's right, didn't you tell me once? The story of the ogre dancing under the hazy moon. You like this kind of thing, don't you? If I had more time, I could tell you about it. Let's go see the autumn leaves together. We'll take Ayeka-san and Sasami-chan too. If it makes you happy, let's all make a lively time of it.*

Ryoko...!

The image of the vividly dancing ogre blurred and wavered, as if viewed from beneath the water. *I might already be dead, at the bottom of the river,* Tenchi thought. *That's right, if I’m already dead, I can be free of this body. I’m going back. I’m going home. I don’t care if I’m just a soul; I’ll see Ryoko one more time before I go.*

"RYOKO—!!"

The moment he realized that voice had burst from his own throat, the woman’s dance stopped.

"Good heavens." Flames leaped from the woman’s mouth. "You broke my power? You broke my binding? Then..."

Tenchi watched, breathless, as the woman’s form transformed before his eyes.

An ogre...

Two horns sprouted, splitting her forehead; her mouth ripped open, and her eyes emitted a brilliant, golden light.

"I shall devour you!" The woman—no, the creature now turned ogre—leaped onto a rock and swung a hand with elongated talons. Instantly, an iron staff appeared in that hand.

I have to run! I can't fight like this—!

Tenchi moved his hands desperately, trying to push himself up. Using his hands, which felt numb all the way to the tips, as props, he hauled his body up. Dragging his frame, which felt like a bag filled with ice water, Tenchi crawled

desperately toward the riverbank. Perhaps because the woman's binding was broken, or perhaps because the Juraian Royal blood revived in the face of a life-threatening crisis, a small amount of strength returned to Tenchi's arms.

"...I won't let you eat me!" Pulling himself onto the bank with every ounce of strength, Tenchi leaned his back against a standing tree and panted heavily.

"How interesting." The ogre laughed hoarsely and, in three bounds, stood before Tenchi. "You would fight me without a weapon? Admirable; you are a fine boy. Then as a final mercy, I shall take your head with a single blow."

Just as the ogre raised the iron staff high, a sharp swing came crashing down toward Tenchi.

"Whoa!" Tenchi threw himself sideways as the tree behind him splintered and flew apart.

"Such a poor loser." The ogre laughed playfully and immediately swung the staff down with a reverse grip. At the last second, Tenchi twisted his body to dodge.

"Lighthawk Sword!" Tenchi screamed. He didn't know how much his body could endure, but he knew if he ran, he would surely be killed. In this darkness, the only thing he could rely on was his own power.

"I won't let it end here!" Cursing his unmoving body, he desperately pulled himself up. When the ogre saw the shining sword appear in Tenchi's hand, it leaped back in surprise. "What a beautiful blade. If that is your power, then I shall switch to a suitable weapon as well."

The ogre waved a hand; the iron staff vanished, and a blade of flame appeared. "Now, let us begin." The ogre leaped through the air and struck at Tenchi with terrifying force. Twice, three times, the energy of the Lighthawk Sword collided with the otherworldly power, sending flashes of light through the night.

"Quite a strength you have." The ogre's mouth split wide in a grin. "But you are barely able to stand. Have you suddenly found this world too precious to leave? Do you regret having your life taken?" Small flames danced from the ogre's mouth, reflecting in its golden eyes. "Come, dance. Let your final moments bloom like a flower, until you vanish like the morning dew of the night." The

ogre’s form soared through the air, turning into fire once more as it struck out violently.

Just a few hours prior. "Hey, I wonder what happened to Tenchi-niichan?" Sasami looked up at the grandfather clock. "It’s almost ten. Did he say he’d be this late today?"

"He must be having a wonderful conversation at his friend's house. Perhaps he will stay the night; the rain doesn't look like it’s going to stop." Ayeka looked up at the clock, then out the window. "I’m sure he’ll call soon. Come now, Sasami, you must get to bed."

"Okay..." Sasami stood up obediently but turned back to her sister with a worried expression. "Where’s Ryoko-oneechan?"

"It seemed she went out into the rain a moment ago." As she spoke, Ryoko appeared. "I smell something supernatural." She shook out her wet hair, spraying water everywhere.

"Honestly, Ryoko-san! You're getting the floor wet. Go dry off in the bathroom!" Ignoring Ayeka’s complaint, Ryoko frowned and peered into the darkness outside. Suddenly, she teleported and sat cross-legged on the sofa. "Maybe it's my imagination. Even if it is a spirit, it's far away. Well, probably nothing major." As if just noticing, she looked toward Sasami. "Sasami-chan, toss me a towel. I’m soaked. Autumn rain is freezing."

"Sure!" Sasami ran out of the living room and returned with a bath towel. "What is it, Ryoko-oneechan? Is something outside?"

"Nah." Ryoko gave a sharp grin. "It's fine, I just got a bit curious. Even if something does come, you've got me, right? I'll take 'em down in a heartbeat."

"Yeah!" Sasami finally smiled and picked up Ryo-Ohki. "Can I sleep with Ryo-chan? Ryoko-oneechan, aren't you cold?"

"Don't worry about it. I'm strong." Ryoko ruffled Sasami’s hair and tossed the damp towel aside. "Well, I'm gonna do one more patrol. Ayeka, make sure the doors are locked tight."

"Locking doors doesn't mean anything to a monster like you," Ayeka laughed. "Come, let's sleep. If you stay up late, you'll be late tomorrow."

"Sasami is never late. You're the one who sleeps in, sister." Ryoko watched the sisters bickering with a gentle smile, then phased through the window glass and vanished into the darkness.

"Ryoko-san?" Ayeka suddenly felt a pang of unease and pulled Sasami closer by the shoulder, but she quickly regained her composure and ushered Sasami up the stairs. "Tenchi-sama really is hopeless. He stayed up late at his friend's house just the other day, too." For a moment, the thought that something bad might have happened to Tenchi made Ayeka’s spine go cold. "It's getting chilly. Let's get another blanket out." Ayeka spoke in a purposefully bright voice to shake off the ominous feeling and led the way upstairs.

As Ryoko reached the mountain behind the house, the presence of the supernatural felt even stronger than before. "I don't like this," Ryoko muttered, furrowing her brows and turning her face into the driving rain.

Where... where is it?

She closed her eyes and listened with the "ears of her heart" to the presence. Thinking of ogres made her heart stir. Was it the male ogre she had seen under the hazy spring moon? If it was, she almost felt like she wanted to see him again. "No..." Ryoko sighed deeply. The scent was different. A heavy floral scent... chrysanthemums, or perhaps incense. Following the slight flow of energy she felt against her skin, Ryoko began to glide soundlessly through the air. The distant murmur of the river reached her. Then, suddenly, she saw an unseasonal flash of light toward the stream.

"A supernatural anomaly!?" Ryoko’s entire body tensed as she caught the spiritual anomaly. An ominous red light burned like fire in the darkness, making Ryoko’s heart tremble. It was a tremor she had never felt before. "Who is it...?" At that instant, Tenchi’s voice—sounding as if he were spitting blood—pierced Ryoko’s ears like an arrow.

"Tenchi!?" Ryoko vanished instantly and flew through the air toward the source of Tenchi's voice.

"TENCHI!!" Ryoko felt her breath catch. At the foot of the bridge sunken in darkness, Tenchi lay collapsed as if submerged in the deep stream. The one looming over him, iron blade of flame in hand and locked in a struggle, was indeed an ogre. The light of the Lighthawk Sword flickered. An evil energy radiated from the ogre, who was dressed in crimson trousers and a silver-leafed robe, making Ryoko’s skin crawl. Tenchi’s face was as pale as a corpse; his hands gripping the hilt of the Lighthawk Sword were shaking, and it looked as if the ogre’s blade was about to burn his flesh.

"You bastard!" Ryoko swung her Aura Blade and brought it down with all her might toward the ogre’s back. The ogre twisted away just as Ryoko stopped her blade at the very last second.

"Ryoko!?" The ogre vanished instantly and reappeared on a rock in the middle of the river.

"Tenchi, hang in there!" Ryoko picked up the bloodless Tenchi easily and laid him on the grass. The sheer coldness of him made her spine freeze.

"Stop, Ryoko... it's strong..." Tenchi tried to sit up but his head slumped back.

"Will you take my prey? Are you an ogre as well?" At the sharp voice, Ryoko whirled around just as the ogre kicked off from the rock. She saw it fly through the air, then its form vanished and it grabbed Ryoko by the hair. Leaping high enough to clear the bridge, it prepared to pierce Ryoko’s body with a reverse grip on the flaming blade. But the tip of the blade stopped.

"You idiot... You've got some nerve laying a hand on *my* Tenchi!" Ryoko’s bare hand gripped the flaming blade and pushed it back.

"Hah!" The ogre leaped back, leaving the blade in Ryoko’s hand. "You are not human. Who are you to push back my flames with your bare hands!?" A new blade appeared in the ogre's hand.

"I don't give a damn!" Ryoko’s eyes slit into golden crescents. "I don't even want to know your name. I'm here to settle the score for this!" An Aura Blade appeared in Ryoko’s hand. A cruel light, somewhere between intense rage and joy, flashed in her eyes. "I'm gonna take your head!" With those words, Ryoko’s blade swept toward the ogre's neck.

The demon’s body seemed to erupt with flames for an instant, but the next moment, it vanished into the sky, lost in the shadows.

"Where the hell did it go!?"

Before Tenchi could even think about how impressive that was, the demon’s laughter echoed from the darkness. "A fine boy indeed. I had thought to take and devour you in place of Taira no Koremochi. But with an ogre stronger than I guarding you, it is useless to persist."

The demon laughed once more and then disappeared, blending into the sound of the night storm. For a moment, it looked as if a *karaori* (Noh costume) woven with shimmering designs of fallen autumn leaves was floating on the dark river surface, but when Tenchi blinked and looked again, there was nothing there.

Ryoko landed lightly on the riverbank with her golden eyes glowing, let out a deep breath, and hurried to Tenchi’s side. "Are you alright?" She knelt and pressed her ear to Tenchi’s chest to check his heartbeat.

"Ryoko..." Tenchi managed to open his eyes. "I’m sorry you had to see me looking so pathetic."

"You idiot." Ryoko grinned down at him. "What were you doing all alone? You could've just called me, and I would've been here in a flash. Exorcising demons is my job, isn't it? Look at your hands—they’re freezing."

Ryoko’s warm hands enveloped Tenchi’s, rubbing them gently. "Your hands are so cold... you could have died."

Suddenly, Ryoko pulled her hands away, lifted Tenchi into her arms, and floated into the air. "I need to find somewhere dry. A shrine... would that work? It’s a bit dark, but it’s better than this place."

Ryoko smiled shyly. "Hey, you don't want to go home like this and cause a huge scene, right? I don’t mind, but I thought maybe *you* wouldn't want that."

"Anywhere is fine," Tenchi whispered, his eyes fluttering. "Wherever you say is fine. I’m just... so incredibly sleepy."

"It’s okay. I’ll stay awake the whole time and watch over you. Don't worry, Tenchi..."

There was no answer. Tenchi had fallen asleep with the innocent expression of a child. Ryoko adjusted her hold on him as if he were something fragile, and then, in an instant, she vanished.

Past midnight, the rain ceased. By the time the moon emerged from the clouds to cast a pale light upon the river, the presence of both the demon and the human had vanished, leaving only the remnants of the rain glistening like dew.

Only the tree Tenchi had leaned against stood partially broken, its snapped branches and leaves scattered in the dew, as if to tell the tale of the night’s fierce dream.

"Re: I'm not laughing"

Yo. It's Amagasaki. Tenchi, are you actually alive after all that? You really are a pitiable guy, you know that?

> You might laugh, but I really did meet an ogre. I figured if I told you over the phone, you'd think I'd gone crazy, so I'm writing it in this email...

Yeah, definitely. Whether it's a phone call or an email, I wouldn't believe it from anyone but you. But man, you're lucky. I mean, even if it was an ogre, she was a beautiful woman coming on to you—if it were me, I'd be thrilled. "One more drink, please," "Sure thing, coming right up!" ...but then again, the aftermath is a bit scary, isn't it?

I've been thinking, you were born under a special star. I'm sure there are plenty of not-so-normal things that happen, but there are just as many fun things, too, so shouldn't you just enjoy it to the fullest? You have this weird obsession with being "normal"—which is a good trait of yours, but I don't think being normal is the only way to be.

Tenchi, do you really want a normal life? Going back to school, getting a job, getting married, becoming independent, having kids, and building a humble, happy family... wait, that's my dream. "Being normal and ordinary is pretty good too..."—see, I take it back already.

But you? You might not suit that kind of life even if you tried. You're surrounded by all those girls and yet you still keep saying you want to be a "normal high school student." Usually, people call that being a "weirdo," you know?

Oh, but if you were going to get married, I think Ayeka-san would be best. She's beautiful, refined, and well-bred—it's ideal. Ryoko-san is cool, but she's scary. She looks stronger than both of us combined. Yeah, it's gotta be Ayeka-san. I'd be sad if I couldn't see Sasami-chan anymore, though.

Anyway, I'll come over to hang out again sometime. See ya. — Amagasaki

Holy Night

At the end of the year, just two days before Christmas, Masaki Nobuyuki was walking through the shopping district with a grimace. The streets of December were sparkling with illuminations, and Christmas songs played joyfully. The people passing by, bundled in their coats, all seemed buoyant, as if they were already looking forward to the Eve.

"Christmas, huh..." Nobuyuki sighed, looking up at a large banner hanging from a department store. He hesitated at the entrance. *What should I do about presents!?* That was the main reason for his sour expression.

When Tenchi was small, it was easy. He would casually find out what Tenchi wanted and place the gift by his bedside after he was asleep. The next morning, he would pretend to be surprised.

"So Santa really does exist!" Nobuyuki still remembered the young Tenchi's delighted face. *"There's no chimney, so how did he get in? Where does Santa live? How did he get my letter?"* He must have given some vague answer about Santa using magic, but he had forgotten the details. *"Santa Claus is real! Because he brought me a present just like I asked!"* The young Tenchi believed it without a shadow of a doubt.

Of course, that happy era didn't last. Once Tenchi entered elementary school, he learned the truth. Instead, he started requesting things directly from Nobuyuki. Maybe that was easier. It moved from the realm of fantasy to reality, so he could say things like "Wait until Christmas" or "That's too expensive." He used to go to the department store to buy plastic models, robot toys, telescopes, or games, but by the time Tenchi reached middle school, even that habit faded.

"Dad, there's a CD I want." "Oh, Christmas. How much is it?" That's how it went.

However, since last year, Christmas had made a sudden comeback in the Masaki household. The cause, of course, was the massive influx of aliens. Even if they were aliens, girls who were girls at heart wouldn't miss such a romantic event.

After all, it was the perfect scenario: *"Giving a present to the person you love most on the holiest night of the year."*

There was no doubt it would be a chaotic affair regarding Tenchi again this year. The problem was what came before that. "I was so busy last year that I missed buying a present, so I have to do something this year..." Nobuyuki fretted at the department store entrance, unsure of what one buys for girls (especially aliens).

"Dad!?" Someone called out, and Nobuyuki nearly had a heart attack. "W-what? It's you?" He turned to find his son with his hands in his jumper pockets. Before he could ask what he was doing here, Tenchi beat him to it.

"What are you doing here?" "Oh, nothing. Just meeting someone..." "Hmm." Tenchi nodded, looking uninterested, and turned away. "Well, I have shopping to do." "Shopping?" His voice must have betrayed his panic. Tenchi turned back. "It's Christmas Eve tomorrow, right? I came to buy some cards." "Cards?" "I don't have much money..."

Tenchi smiled shyly and looked up at the illuminated street trees. "Sasami-chan and Ayeka-san said they'd make the cake. George-san is doing the cooking. I was going to tell you when I got home, but maybe you could buy something too, Dad? Well, I'm going now."

"O-oh, right." Nobuyuki watched his son's retreating back, stunned. *Cards, huh... So, he's basically telling me I need to buy presents!?* "H-hey, Tenchi!" But his son had already vanished into the bustling holiday crowd.

"Damn it..." Ryoko clicked her tongue while unraveling her yarn. This was the fifth or sixth time she had to start over. "Who the hell was it that said 'handmade gifts are best for Christmas' anyway!?" She had happened to see a feature in a girls' manga magazine with a flow chart that led her to "a hand-knit scarf."

"I would have preferred a 'two-hour all-you-can-eat' or 'eat a 1kg steak in 15 minutes for free' challenge..." Of course, no such options existed.

"Aaaaaah!!" Ryoko threw the knitting needles and yarn aside. "Why does it keep curling up like that!? Are you a relative of a poster or a calendar? That's it, I'm

done!" As any reader who has tried knitting knows, stockinette stitch—the most basic knit—curls up endlessly from the edges if you knit as tightly as Ryoko.

"This isn't for me." Ryoko declared, leaving the needles where they lay, and teleported from the deepest part of the shrine. It was almost touching that she had gone out of her way to bring yarn and needles to the shrine just to keep it a secret. "I don't need tricks like that—I've got my own weapons." Ryoko grinned and began to glide through the air.

Ayeka was staring blankly into space, leaning her chin on the back of the sofa, having forgotten her hunger. A magazine lay on her lap, open to a horoscope page, but her hands hadn't moved for 15 minutes. She wasn't watching the news on TV, nor could she hear the broadcaster. A serious problem occupied her mind.

"Lucky color is red... Lucky place is an Italian restaurant. If you're giving a gift, give something personal..."

Ayeka abruptly swept the magazine off her lap and ran to Nobuyuki's study. She opened a dictionary, not even bothering to turn on the light. "Oh my..." She pondered for a while, then slowly closed the dictionary. "Something personal of mine?" *Does that mean... belongings? Clothes or accessories? Or perhaps something I use? A ballpoint pen, a toothbrush, a notebook, cosmetics...* Ayeka blushed a deep red. *The most personal thing of all... is myself! I shall present myself to Tenchi-sama. I am the gift. That is a present more fitting than any other for a holy night...*

Ayeka, who had been getting worked up by herself, sighed, turned off the light, and left the study. "That's impossible, of course. I'm not Ryoko-san..." Feeling as though she were back at square one, she went downstairs, wondering what on earth she should give as a Christmas present.

Sasami and George, the Masaki family's chef and butler, were happily preparing dinner in the kitchen. "Hey, George-san. What should we have for the Christmas Eve meal? Fried chicken, salad, pizza, sushi—things everyone can snack on?"

"That sounds lovely. But what about the cake? A *Bûche de Noël*? A strawberry shortcake? Or perhaps something more mature like a chocolate cake?"

"Oh, the cake? I've already decided. A three-tier cake! The bottom tier is the town at the foot of the mountain. The second tier is the forest and lake. At the very top, there's Santa's house, and Santa is sliding down in his sleigh! Wait a second!"

Sasami ran out of the kitchen and returned with her sketchbook. "Like this. It's super fairytale-like, right? The problem is how to make it." George stopped his work to inspect the dream Christmas cake drawn in the notebook, then smiled and returned it. "Of course I can make it. We can make the decorations out of sweets. A wafer house, marzipan dolls, a tree stump out of *baumkuchen*. We can even make a forest out of parsley."

"Wow... thank you!" Sasami's eyes sparkled. "Then it's a snow-covered mountain, so it must be a white whipped cream cake. Let's use powdered sugar on the roof of the house to make it look like snow has piled up."

The conversation turned to the technical aspects of confectionery, and Sasami began taking notes while nodding enthusiastically. "George-san, you know everything. You're amazing!" "That is thanks to everyone else," George replied with his usual modest smile. "Thanks to Tenchi-dono and Nobuyuki-dono borrowing cookbooks from the library, and Washu-san finding information on the Internet, I can focus on cooking without any worries."

Inside the memory of this galaxy-origin robot were stored neatly organized recipes for every dish imaginable. "If you get confused along the way, please feel free to ask anytime." "Yup, thanks!" Sasami appreciated George's kindness. He understood her feelings perfectly. "Because I promised Tenchi-niichan. That Sasami and sister would make the cake. Oh, that's right! I have to make a present too! Since I'm at it, I might as well make them together!"

Sasami closed her sketchbook with a bright face and went to put it back in her secret drawer.

The galaxy's strongest first-class detective duo, Mihoshi and Kiyone, were working hard at their part-time jobs at the convenience store today. "Hey, Mihoshi. What are you doing for Christmas at Tenchi-san's place?" "Eh? Isn't

Kiyone coming?" Mihoshi turned around with wide eyes. "That’s not what I meant. I’m talking about presents. If you're going to buy something, you have to go today, right?" "Oh, right. I completely forgot," Mihoshi nodded nonchalantly and started stocking shelves. "What are you doing, Kiyone?"

"That’s exactly what I'm thinking about..." Kiyone pondered while helping next to Mihoshi. "I was thinking, since there will be a lot of people, maybe something that adds to the party would be best?" "Like snacks?" Mihoshi looked at the Christmas product shelf. There were red boots filled with assortments of candy and chocolate, party-sized snack bags, and candies with built-in music boxes lined up.

"Yeah, that’s a good idea too." Kiyone poked Mihoshi’s elbow as if she had suddenly come up with something. "Aren't you giving anything to Tenchi-san?" "Eh? Me? Hmmm..." Mihoshi peeked at Kiyone with a shy expression. "What about you, Kiyone?" "Me? Oh, we need sake and juice, don't we?" Kiyone ran to the register, leaving Mihoshi behind.

"Geez, Kiyone-chan." Just then, Mihoshi thought of a wonderful present and completely forgot about Kiyone. "Yes, this is perfect! And it doesn't cost that much." For once, Mihoshi kept her idea to herself and smiled. "I can't wait for tomorrow." Mihoshi whispered like a child and started stocking the rest of the merchandise.

"Christmas, huh..." Washu muttered, stopping her hands from typing on the keyboard. A Christmas song played at low volume inside the lab. "I could become Washu-chan the angel and grant everyone’s wishes..." or Washu-chan the Santa, handing out presents everywhere.

"Not feeling it," Washu shrugged. With George the butler/secretary/assistant in the kitchen, she had no one to talk to but herself. "Maybe I should be Washu-chan the devil..." *How about making this a Christmas they’ll never forget?* Washu’s face suddenly lit up, and she began to ponder the "devilish" idea.

The Truth Detector. A device that forces anyone who uses it to speak only the truth. It would be a very fitting event for the night the Son of God was born. Though, there was a non-zero risk of family collapse. *The Tenchi Duplicator.* An event where each person gets a Tenchi as a gift. Since they are copies, you can

use them however you like, though the original is off-limits. Of course, Tenchi-dono also gets a Tenchi. Although, there was a non-zero risk of the original's mind collapsing.

"I like it... this is an invention worthy of the genius Washu-chan." Washu was smirking with a face that would have surely turned George pale, but she suddenly stopped when she remembered Sasami's face. "...Actually, that's bad." If she ruined Sasami's efforts to make it a fun Christmas, Tenchi wouldn't stay silent. "Can't be helped. I guess I'll just celebrate the holy night quietly."

Washu leaned back in her chair and stared at the lab ceiling, but then she suddenly sat up as if she'd thought of something. "Yes, this! This is the way!" Only God knows what Washu thought of.

"Merry Christmas!!" Eve finally arrived, and the Masaki house was livelier than ever. The entrance and living room had wreaths, a Christmas tree sparkling with multicolored lights, and red and gold tinsel draped over walls and lintels—the atmosphere was perfect.

"Tenchi-niichan, help me carry the plates!" In the kitchen, Sasami, George, and Ayeka were busy preparing the feast. "Coming, coming!" Tenchi, wearing his *hanten* (padded jacket), scurried back and forth between the living room and kitchen carrying chicken decorated with white paper frills, mountains of salad, and sandwiches. Ryoko, having already claimed her spot in the living room, was in a good mood after opening the wine early.

"Hey, can I eat yet? I'm starving!" "Ryoko-chan, that's bad manners." As Ryoko reluctantly withdrew her hand after being swatted by Washu, the doorbell rang.

"Good evening~! Merry Christmas!" "Yay! Something smells super good!" Kiyone and Mihoshi appeared with big smiles, carrying cardboard boxes like a delivery service. "Oh, welcome." "Oh, Ojisan (Nobuyuki). Sorry for intruding~." After giving a light nod to Nobuyuki, who had poked his head out into the hallway, Kiyone placed the boxes on the floor with a thud.

"This is wine, oolong tea, and juice, so please help yourselves. There are snacks inside, too." "Oh, Kiyone-san, Mihoshi-san, you went out of your way for us—sorry about that." Katsuhito poked his head out from behind Nobuyuki.

"Sorry to bring something so trivial. Is there anything I can help with?" "Don't worry about it!" Katsuhito waved them over, glass of *mizuwari* in hand, and they all headed into the living room.

"Merry Christmas!!" The second call echoed in the Masaki living room. As Christmas songs played loudly, glasses were passed around, and laughter filled the air.

"Hey, hey, can we open presents now?" Sasami pulled on her sister's sleeve, her eyes darting toward the mountain of presents piled around the tree. "Oh, is it present time?" Ryoko, already quite tipsy, picked up on it immediately.

"I'm first!" No sooner had she shouted than she wrapped her arms around Tenchi's neck and gave him a loud, flamboyant kiss on the cheek. "Tenchi~, you can do whatever you want with me tonight. Isn't that better than some lame present? Want me to put a ribbon on, too?"

"That's a foul! Yellow card!" Ayeka cut in. "Tenchi-sama, I worried quite a lot, but following the traditions handed down in the Jurai Royal Family, I have decided to give you this charm. Please think of it as me and keep it with you always." Ayeka handed him a small doll, blushing.

The doll, with its black hair and red kimono reminiscent of the Juraiam royal family, bore a small resemblance to Ayeka.

"I have sealed a single strand of my hair inside it. It is said that by doing so, one's feelings are conveyed," she explains.

"Oh... how cute," Tenchi says, accepting it honestly and gazing at it closely. The stitching is uneven, but it carries a handmade warmth.

"You'll get cursed if you wear something like that. That hair looks like it's packed with grudges," Ryoko interjects, immediately striking back.

Ignoring the bickering between Ryoko and Ayeka, Sasami struggles with a large box, desperately trying to untie the ribbon.

"Augh, it won't come off..."

"Here, let me see," Kiyone says, untying the knot with practiced hands. Out pops a large plush Santa Claus.

"Wow... so cute!" Sasami hugs the Santa tightly.

"I couldn't think of anything else. If you don't like it, you can trade it in," Nobuyuki says with an embarrassed laugh.

"No, it's wonderful! Thank you, grandpa!"

"Wait, wait. Stay just like that." Nobuyuki captures the image of Sasami hugging the round Santa plush to her cheek with his camera.

"Hey, hey, this present is for Kiyone," Mihoshi says, returning with two long, narrow boxes after rummaging through the pile. Kiyone receives a light blue scarf, while Mihoshi pulls out a cream-colored one for herself.

"Oh my... thank you for including us," Kiyone says, her cheeks flushing with joy.

"Hey, what about me? Don't I get one?" Ryoko emerges from the argument.

"Oh, here it is! Ryoko-san, you get this small box." As Ryoko tears off the wrapping paper, she finds a single lipstick inside.

"What is this?"

"I just thought something like that might be nice for a change," Nobuyuki mutters in a barely audible voice.

"Huh..." Ryoko stares intently at the pale pink lipstick, then suddenly grins and vanishes. A moment later, she reappears with a faint pearlescent sheen on her lips. "Well, I guess I'll take it." She doesn't seem entirely displeased.

Ayeka’s box contains a potted white cyclamen, densely packed with buds. "Oh, how beautiful..." Ayeka, a lover of flowers, gazes at it in delight and checks the moisture of the soil. "Thank you. This is more pleasing than anything else. I shall raise it with the utmost care."

"It's just a small token of gratitude, Ayeka-san, for never letting the flowers in this house fade," Nobuyuki whispers, his voice fading again as he tops off his whiskey.

"Alright, my turn. Here you go," Ryoko says, handing a ribbon-adorned carrot to Ryo-Ohki.

"Meeww!" Ryo-Ohki’s eyes well up as she hugs the carrot to her chest.

Washu’s box contains a Shogi set. "Oh! The legendary battle game passed down from ancient times. Would anyone care for a match?"

"Very well, I shall be your opponent," Katsuhito says, beckoning her over while happily sipping his *daiginjo* sake. "Tenchi, this is a wonderful Christmas. Perhaps I’ll leave the Masaki Shrine to you and convert to the priesthood."

"Grandpa, you can’t be serious," Tenchi replies with a weary laugh.

"Oh, right. Washu-chan’s present is in that green box. They’re all the same, so go ahead and take one each."

"What is it? What is it?" The five girls lean in, heads together. As soon as Sasami opens the lid, the greatest commotion since the founding of the Masaki house breaks out.

"Whoa! What is this!?"

"Oh my... how cute!!"

"No way... is this real!?"

Five mini-Tenchis—about 20 centimeters tall and wearing *samue*—are passed around, touched with timid excitement. Suddenly, the one in Sasami's palm grins.

"Eek! It smiled!" Sasami nearly drops the mini-Tenchi in surprise.

"They're 'Pocket Tenchis'—'Poke-Ten' for short. They can't speak, and they’ll revert to raw bansu matter in exactly two hours," Washu says, turning back from the *parlor* with a smirk.

"Washu-san..." Tenchi watches, speechless, as living dolls identical to him are hugged to the girls' chests.

"Why on earth would you make something like this!?"

"Hmm? I thought I’d free you from being fought over for at least one night. It’s a harmless event, really."

"Whoa! This guy’s actually wearing underwear!"

"H-hey, Ryoko!" Tenchi scrambles to grab the Poke-Ten from Ryoko, who is lifting its tiny jacket.

"Relax, it’s not *your* underwear," she retorts, vanishing instantly and reappearing on the rafters.

"Oh my... what shall I do? Washu-san, even if I am gifted such a tiny Tenchi-sama, I have no mental preparation..." Ayeka flushes, holding the Poke-Ten in her palm while it looks up at her with a blank expression.

"Mini-Tenchi-niichan, want something to eat? Juice?"

"Eek, so cute! The mini-Tenchi is walking on the table!"

Sasami and Mihoshi watch the Poke-Ten with fascination, while Kiyone, unsure of how to handle it, gently strokes its head with her fingertip.

"Sasami-chan, *bansu* is a native organism from some planet, right? But the more I look at it, the more it looks exactly like Tenchi-sama..."

"Is my face really that round?" Tenchi gingerly picks up the Poke-Ten and places it in his palm.

"Tenchi, stay right there!" Nobuyuki clicks his shutter. "Amazing... it's just like *Issun-boshi* (the One-Inch Boy). But it’s supposed to be an alien organism, right? Looking closely, it has your exact dopey face."

"Dad..." Tenchi slumps, complaining to the Poke-Ten. "It’s not a dopey face. Even if I am the model, that’s just mean... wait!?" The Poke-Ten tilts its head and looks up at him.

"Oh, I forgot! Sister, help me!" Sasami jumps up and runs to the kitchen.

"Yes, yes, what is it?" Ayeka follows, Poke-Ten in her pocket.

"Ta-da! The Christmas cake Sasami and Sister made!" A luxurious three-tier cake arrives on a wagon.

"Alright, one shot right there!" Nobuyuki clicks his camera. But the next instant, as the Poke-Ten pops out of Ayeka's pocket, it instantly reverts into a

gelatinous, gummy-like form. Ryoko's Poke-Ten and the one on the table do the same, bouncing around like rubber balls before merging with the others.

"Oh, the Poke-Ten-chans..." Sasami's eyes go wide. The merged mass of *bansu* leaps onto the wagon and begins devouring the cake.

"Uhmmmm..." Washu arrives and plucks up the wiggling mass. "Sorry, forgot to mention. These things have a weakness for sweets." She marches straight back to her lab.

"Well, that ruined a good moment," Ryoko grumbles.

"Come on, let's just eat the cake. Sasami-chan, you made this so well," Tenchi says, changing the subject.

"Yeah. A little of it got eaten, though."

"It's almost a shame to cut into it."

"Sister worked really hard, too," Sasami says, shyly giving the credit to her sister.

"Oh, Sasami will go get new plates."

"No, it's fine. They're up high." Just as Tenchi returns with a stack of plates, Ryoko flies across the room, arms wide. "Tenchi~! I want the real thing after all. Come over here and have a drink with me!"

"Whoa, Ryoko! Careful..."

The fate of Ryoko, Tenchi, and the plates is exactly as one might expect.

"Oh dear." Mihoshi, holding a pitcher, accidentally spills juice over Tenchi's head.

"Oh my, Tenchi-sama!" Ayeka and Kiyone rush over in a panic.

"Ryoko, you've had too much to drink," Sasami says, appearing behind Tenchi, who is standing in the washroom drying his hair. "Tenchi-niichan, sorry about that. Are you okay?"

"Ryoko-san is really impossible sometimes," he says with a wry smile. Sasami hands him a small box. "This is a present. Don't show anyone else, or they'll eat it."

"Wow... thank you. What is it?" Tenchi accepts the box happily.

"Christmas cutout cookies. This box is special, just for Tenchi-niichan."

He never gets to ask what makes them special (marijuana), because he feels a sharp pain on the back of his neck near his hairline. "Ow." He turns around, but can't find the cause.

"I wonder if I snagged my hair on something?"

From the living room, a cheerful chorus fills the air: *"Jingle Bells, Jingle Bells..."* Nobuyuki, Washu, and Kiyone are singing with arms linked. Ayeka is belting out a clear soprano, and Ryoko is floating in the air with a flushed face.

"Today is a fun Christmas~! Hey, Tenchi, sorry about earlier. Let's see, let me see your back." Ryoko flies over immediately.

"Oh, there's a stain on your back too!" Sasami cries.

"More, everyone crowd in! Kiyone-san, Washu-san, get in the frame!" Nobuyuki shouts, crouched with his camera.

"Oh, me too!" Ayeka rushes to fit next to Tenchi.

"Old man, let me take the picture this time!" Ryoko snatches the camera. "Oh, Ryoko! Don't drop it! That lens is expensive!" Nobuyuki yells in a panic.

"What? You think I'm drunk~~?" The camera slips from Ryoko's hand.

"Aaaaaah!?" Just as it is about to hit the floor, the camera lands in Ryoko's hand as if by magic. "Just kidding. Just a joke."

Laughter, chatter, carols, and screams fill the Masaki living room.

"Okay, that's it, I've hit my limit. Let me rest." Kiyone, out of breath from laughing so hard, slumps down next to the table.

"Yeah, that’s right. Let's take a little break and eat some cake in peace," Tenchi says, sitting down beside her. Once everyone takes their seats and the cake is passed around, things finally quiet down.

"This is delicious... this cake! As expected of Sasami-chan," Mihoshi says, her face already melting with delight.

"This is the first time I've ever had such a fun Christmas!" Kiyone brushes back her hair with a flushed face. "Nobuyuki-ojisam, Tenchi-san, thank you so much! I really should have brought a proper present too."

"But Kiyone-san, you already brought so many things, didn't you?" Tenchi quickly follows up.

"No, I mean for Ojisam (uncle). You didn't get a present, did you?"

"I’m fine," Nobuyuki waves his hands frantically. "I’m at the age where I give presents, not receive them."

"But..."

"Wait, Kiyone." Mihoshi stands up as if she has just remembered something.

"Here, Ojisam. Take one of these."

Mihoshi returns with a round tin filled with colorful, star-shaped chocolates..

"That tiny gold one," she whispered quickly into Nobuyuki's ear. Puzzled but compliant, Nobuyuki reached out and took the small gold chocolate.

"Open it."

As Nobuyuki unwrapped the foil, a small, thin piece of folded paper fell out along with the chocolate.

"Read it."

With everyone holding their breath and watching, Nobuyuki opened the paper.

"Whoever picks this chocolate must be kissed by everyone... what!?"

A chorus of squeals erupted around the flustered Nobuyuki.

"What, a kiss for the old man~? I'd rather have Tenchi," Ryoko grumbled, attempting to fly back up to the rafters.

"Ryoko-san! God is watching!" Mihoshi protested firmly.

"I shall do it," Ayeka said, surprisingly. Her cheeks flushed as she gave Nobuyuki a bird-like kiss on his right cheek.

"Sasami too!" She gave him a kiss on the other cheek like a spring breeze.

"O-oh, well... thank you..." Nobuyuki muttered in a fading voice.

"One, two!" Mihoshi and Kiyone kissed him on both sides in perfect unison.

"Can't be helped," Ryoko muttered. She drifted down from the air and planted a flamboyant kiss right in the center of his forehead.

"Oh, nice touch," Nobuyuki said, a faint pearlescent kiss mark glowing on his brow.

"My, what's all the noise?" The genius scientist asked, eyes wide as she returned from the restroom.

"Washu-san! I am a happy man, to receive such wonderful gifts." Nobuyuki's nose turned bright red as he downed his freshly poured drink.

"Hmm... well, if Nobuyuki-dono says so, then it must be true."

Far beyond the stars, in the darkness separated by time and space, a demon was peering at the scene.

"Presents..." She toyed with the black hair she had just snatched from across space-time. As the seasons turn and the summer sun begins to shine, an unexpected present will be delivered to the Masaki house, but that is a story for another time.

SUBJECT: To Mother Misaki

I apologize for my long silence.

The other day, we celebrated Christmas together and had such a wonderful time. Christmas is a traditional Earth holiday that celebrates the night the baby of God was born. Tenchi-sama told me that it is not a holiday native to our Japan, but one that came from abroad.

"Actually, our house is Shinto, so Christmas doesn't really have anything to do with us, but it's a seasonal event, I suppose," Tenchi-sama said. "Just think of it as a day to eat delicious food and have a fun time with everyone."

And that is exactly what we did—we sang songs, played games, and exchanged presents. It was a very joyful time. If you and Father didn't have your official duties, I would have invited you both. It is a pity the schedules did not align. However, I have come to think that this Earth festival is quite a nice thing.

Jurai has summer festivals, doesn't it? The way people decorate trees with stars and make special sweets to eat, it feels somewhat similar to Star-tica, which made me nostalgic for a Juraian summer. I found myself gazing up at the stars in the night sky, deep in thought about how far away Sasami and I are...

Perhaps because Brother Yosho has lived on Earth for so long, he seems to have none of my sentimentality; he was busy enjoying his favorite sake and absorbed in a game with Washu-san.

Tell me, Mother, don't you think Earth... is a beautiful planet? Compared to the Juraian planet, it is just a small planet on the frontier, merely one of many colonies of the Juraian Royal Family. But this planet is a special one... when we live here like this, cuddling close and sharing our hearts, even in this small way, it begins to feel like a second home.

Of course, Earth is the planet where Mother Funaho was born, and Brother Yosho is here too. But for me, this planet is special because Tenchi-sama is here. Because it is the home where Tenchi-sama was born and raised, and because it is the home Tenchi-sama loves, I also...

Mother, I suppose I must return to Jurai someday, mustn't I? I do not know how Brother Yosho feels about it. But since his tree has taken root in this land, I am sure he wishes to protect his tree without leaving this place. If it were possible, I would like to live on this planet forever... Sasami has started elementary school here and has made many friends. If we could eventually welcome Tenchi-sama to the Juraian Royal Family and be able to travel freely between the two planets, how fun that would be.

I sometimes find myself dreaming of such things. I fear if I spoke of this to Father, it would cause a huge commotion, so I am telling only you, Mother. Would you laugh at my dream, Mother, or would you nod in understanding?

It has become a long letter. To my beloved Mother Misaki and Mother Funaho, and to Father—I send you all my love, along with a Christmas present from Earth from Sasami and me.

The photos were taken by Nobuyuki-ojisam, and the cookies were made by Sasami. I am sending them via the Galaxy Police delivery service, so please accept them.

Please come visit us again. We are waiting for you.

— Ayeka

The Moon Rabbit

"In the olden days of Nara, the capital..."

"Got it!"

With a lively voice and a snap of her small hand, she sent the playing card flying. In the Japanese-style room of the Masaki household, beautiful women were staring with laser-focus at the cards scattered across the floor. The group was the usual crowd: Ayeka, who was reading the cards, followed by Sasami, Ryoko, Washu, and Tenchi.

"I got another one!" Sasami said happily, then set her right hand low in preparation for the next one. "Hey, Tenchi-niichan, *Hyakunin Isshu* (a hundred-poem card game) is so fun!" Even though the New Year's holiday period had already passed, they were still enjoying *karuta* at the Masaki house. Since everyone—Tenchi included—had been quite busy with shrine duties and the like during the year-end and New Year period, this was a slightly delayed celebration.

"Again? Why are kids so strong at this?" grumbled Ryoko, who had been committing fouls left and right.

"Well, she is my sister. Now, here we go. *Ama no hara*... gazing up at the sky, the spring day..." Ayeka, acting as the reader, was quite dignified—as expected of a princess.

"Got it!" A small, plump hand moved with speed too fast for the eye to follow.

"Meow..." A pitiful sound echoed from behind Sasami. It was a very modest sound, as if the creature were complaining about something, or perhaps begging someone to turn around.

"What is it, Ryo-chan? Sorry, but could you go play by yourself for a bit? I can't take my eyes off the cards right now," Sasami said without looking back, her eyes glued to the game.

"Meow..." Ryo-Ohki answered resignedly and began twitching her ears again. Suddenly, a small creature, looking like a clump of brown, black, and white fur, leaped up and latched onto Ryo-Ohki’s ear.

"Miiyagh!" Ryo-Ohki let out a shriek as needle-like claws dug in.

"Uuuu~~~" Ryo-Ohki shook her scratched ears to fling the kitten off, then bared her teeth and growled.

"Meown!" *Smack, smack, smack.* Ryo-Ohki carefully tapped the kitten’s head, making sure not to use her own claws. It had been like this the whole time. Ryo-Ohki’s patience had finally reached its limit.

"Piii~" The kitten, tapped on the head by Ryo-Ohki, let out a pathetic cry. "Pii~! Pii~! Piii~~~!"

"Ryo-chan!!" A sharp reprimand came flying instantly. "That's not allowed! Don't make her cry! She’s still just a baby. You shouldn't be rough with her, right?"

"Mii~~~" Ryo-Ohki flattened her ears and let out a miserable sound.

"There, there. Misoka-chan, that hurt, didn't it? You're a bad big sister, aren't you?" Sasami’s hand reached out to scoop up the calico kitten.

"Piii." The kitten looked up at Sasami’s face with a mesmerized expression and licked Sasami’s nose with a tiny, tiny pink tongue. But before one could even think about it, the kitten’s interest drifted elsewhere.

"Pii?" The kitten widened her eyes at the cards scattered on the floor, then arched her back and began flailing her limbs.

"What’s wrong? You want to get down? Careful, you’ll fall if you squirm like that." The kitten slipped through Sasami’s hands and landed in the middle of the cards. As soon as she started running, she slid on a card and did a somersault.

"Pii!?" She scrambled to catch her own tail and rolled over again. Before one could even blink, she began pouncing on the cards with claws extended.

"Ah, ah, ah... Misoka-chan!" Startled by Sasami’s voice, the kitten pricked her ears up and suddenly sprinted up Ryoko’s lap.

"Ow. Don't use your claws!" Sent flying by Ryoko, the kitten kicked aside several cards, wiggled through the gap between Ayeka and Sasami, and came to a sudden halt in front of Ryo-Ohki. All her fur puffed up.

"Fuuu~~~~!" The kitten jumped sideways in front of Ryo-Ohki, spread her tiny paws, and leaped bravely. *Chomp!*

"Mii-yaaan!" Ryo-Ohki let out a scream, flung her forepaws up after being bitten, and swatted the kitten away.

"Peep!" The kitten, sent flying, sprang back up like a spring-loaded toy and charged at Ryo-Ohki again.

"Meow!" Startled, Ryo-Ohki scrambled up onto Sasami's head and peered down timidly.

"Peeeeep..." Seeing that her playmate had gone somewhere out of reach, the kitten began to wail loudly. "Peep, peep, peeeep..."

"Meow! Meow-meow-meow, meow!" Ryo-Ohki instinctively retorted in Ryo-Ohki-speak.

"See? She's saying she wants to play," Sasami said. Despite her resistance, Ryo-Ohki was effortlessly placed back down on the tatami mats.

"Pe?" With remarkable opportunism, the kitten stopped crying immediately, stuck her tail up, and began circling Ryo-Ohki.

"Hey, look, look. Misoka-chan's eyes are perfectly round! Cats' eyes get round when they're excited, right?" Sasami abandoned the *karuta* game and began observing every move the kitten made. "Look, she's aiming. She's going to go for it. Sister, watch this!" The kitten glued herself to Sasami's side and began wiggling her hindquarters rhythmically. "Butterfly attack, ready... Go!"

The kitten spread her tiny paws, pounced on Ryo-Ohki's tail, held it firmly, and began kicking it rapidly with her hind legs.

"Meow!" Ryo-Ohki shook the kitten off and bolted at full speed to Tenchi's lap. "Meowuu..." She looked up at Tenchi with watery eyes, begging for salvation.

"What’s the matter? You’re such a pathetic thing, and she’s so tiny," Tenchi laughed as he picked Ryo-Ohki up and handed her to Ayeka.

"If you want a lecture, that is Ryoko-san's duty, not mine," Ayeka replied with a laugh, passing Ryo-Ohki to Ryoko.

"You’re such an idiot, letting a little shrimp like that get to you," Ryoko said, pinching Ryo-Ohki and peering into those watery eyes. "What are you doing letting her beat you up!? Just give her one good smack. Go on!" She tossed Ryo-Ohki back out.

"Peeeep!" The kitten, who had been darting back and forth chasing her playmate, charged at Ryo-Ohki with great joy.

"Meooooooow!!" Ryo-Ohki screamed and scrambled out of the Japanese-style room in a panic, collided with the glass sliding door of the living room, and flipped over spectacularly.

"Oh, Ryo-chan!" Sasami stood up.

Ryo-Ohki glanced back once, and with a look of profound resentment, she passed right through the glass and vanished into the night garden. As it has been a long time since we’ve seen it, you readers may have forgotten, but Ryo-Ohki, just like Ryoko, can walk through walls.

"Ryo-chaaaan..." Sasami squinted through the window glass, straining to see into the dark garden. Ryo-Ohki was nowhere to be seen—not a shadow nor a sign of her.

"Maybe I was a little too mean..." Just then, something warm and soft landed on Sasami’s feet.

"Misoka-chan?" Sasami picked the kitten up and turned her toward the window. "That’s not nice. Don't be such a bully. Ryo-chan is a sweet girl, isn't she?"

"Peep?" The kitten tilted her head, looking back at Sasami with her characteristic blue-gray eyes. "Peeeep..." She closed her eyes, nuzzling against Sasami. Her nose had turned cherry-blossom pink, her tongue was tiny, her fangs were miniature-sized, and her fur was fluffy and soft. Her high-pitched voice sounded like nothing but "peep."

"But she’s just so cuuuute! She’s so cute I don’t know what to do with myself!" Sasami squeezed the kitten tight and closed her eyes in bliss as she rubbed her cheek against the warm fur. "Misoka-chan, let’s sleep together again tonight♡"

Caught in the tight embrace, the kitten opened her eyes in surprise and pushed back with her paws in protest.

"Oh, again! You’re going to fall!"

"Here, let me hold her." Ryoko snatched the kitten up. "You’re a tiny thing that looks like you could be eaten in one bite, but you’ve got guts, don't you? Hey, little Miso! You’ve got some nerve, taking on a space battleship with nothing but claws and fangs." Since she hasn't appeared in a long time, you may have forgotten, but Ryo-Ohki is, at her core, Ryoko’s space battleship.

"Peeeeep!" The kitten raised her voice in protest and delivered a brave punch right toward Ryoko’s nose.

"Ouch, ouch! I told you to stop with the claws!"

"Give her here!" Sasami hurriedly snatched the kitten back.

"Sheesh, what a violent little thing! Who picked up this beast anyway?"

"She’s your space battleship, remember?" Washu replied playfully, while silently building a pyramid with the scattered *karuta* cards.

I shouldn't have found her...

Ryo-Ohki looked up at the crescent moon and let out a long, weary sigh. The crescent moon, thin as a kitten’s claw, was stuck in the quiet, freezing winter sky.

Misoka-chan... what a name you were given.

In a fit of pique(wounded pride), she leaped up onto the gatepost. She had been covered in trash, caked in mud, her fur matted and messy, and she had been shivering. If Ryo-Ohki hadn't found her, there’s no telling what would have happened. She had been crying out for her "mommy."

Ryo-Ohki looked up at the stone steps leading to the Masaki Shrine. Usually, there weren't many visitors, but people had been coming and going quite a bit lately. They called it "New Year's Eve." They talked about "the first shrine visit of the year."

It was between that New Year's Eve and the first shrine visit that she had found her. A kitten shivering in the darkness beneath the floorboards of the old man's shrine.

Ryo-Ohki remembered the sensation of holding the kitten’s scruff in her mouth. She had been soft, helpless, and fluffy-light. And then, the instincts of the animal that served as the basis for her form had reawakened.

That’s right. Ryo-Ohki is a cat, too.

When Ryo-Ohki, originally a space battleship, fell into the pond near the Masaki house and regenerated, Ryoko had used the old man’s cat as a model for the body. When asked why, she had said she liked the shape, and that it would be too sad to let that cat die of sickness just like that...

It seemed that cat, whose name was "Chibi," had been a black cat. It’s unclear why the original cat transformed into a "cat-rabbit" creature, but if she had stayed a cat, she probably would have been fed commercial cat food instead of delicious carrots, so it was truly a blessing for Ryo-Ohki.

That was why she ended up picking up the kitten. Without realizing that it would lead to such a troublesome situation.

"Ryo-Ohki-dono?"

Suddenly addressed from below her feet, Ryo-Ohki was so startled she nearly tumbled off.

"What are you brooding about?"

"Azaka?" Ryo-Ohki replied in Ryo-Ohki-speak.

"Did I look like I was worrying?"

"I heard a sigh," came Kamidake's voice from the other side. "Sighing all alone at this hour is proof that something is troubling you."

"Yeah, that's right," Ryo-Ohki replied, shivering. "It's cold... aren't you two cold standing there acting like gateposts?"

"We are guardians of Jurai. We can withstand everything from the absolute zero of space to the scorching heat of a solar flare. A little change in temperature like this doesn't amount to anything," Azaka replied amusedly, the gem atop its body blinking. "Don't try to change the subject. What are you so worried about, Ryo-Ohki-dono?"

"....."

Ryo-Ohki hesitated. She didn't want to say it. But she wanted someone to listen.

"That... that thing... even though I saved her..." The frustration she had been suppressing for a week climbed straight into the red zone. "...Sasami-chan has been taken away from me!!"

For a moment, the gems of Azaka and Kamidake stopped blinking in shock, then began to flash frantically, like Morse code.

"Here you go, time for milk," Sasami said, putting kitten milk—dissolved in warm water—into a small dish. She gazed in delight as the ravenous kitten slurped it up at high-speed-camera pace.

"So cuuute..." Her face broke into a smile. "Cats... kittens... why are they such adorable creatures!?"

"Sasami, you're absolutely obsessed with this little one, aren't you?" Ayeka smiled from above Sasami, who was squatting on the kitchen floor. "Tell me, Tenchi-sama, are kittens always this small? I feel like I'll accidentally step on her if I'm not careful where I walk."

"She's only about two months old or so," Tenchi said, looking down at the kitten and smiling as he watched its belly round out. "Kittens are cute. I know because I used to have one, too. Come to think of it, I wonder what happened to the 'Chibi' that used to live at Grandpa's shrine..."

The tail-shaped accessory on Ryoko's outfit twitched.

"W-who knows. Ryo-Ohki is cute too, right?"

"Ryoko, what's wrong?" Tenchi looked up. "Do you not like cats?"

"No, nothing like that. I just thought *she* might be sulking," Ryoko said, looking down at the kitten with an indifferent face. "I guess she still has those animal instincts left, huh?" she muttered wistfully. "She's a girl, after all. Well, they'll get along eventually."

"???" Tenchi remained, looking puzzled, as Ryoko turned and headed back toward the sofa.

"Ryo-Ohki-dono, I understand your feelings, but please, calm down."

"Sasami-hime doesn't mean any harm by it, either." Azaka and Kamidake's gems blinked busily.

"Uuuuu~~" Ryo-Ohki groaned with a pathetic expression. "Because... if I go home, I have to deal with that kitten again. If I try to do anything, Sasami-chan glares at me with a scary face. And at night, she sleeps holding the kitten. Sasami-chan doesn't need Ryo-Ohki anymore..."

Ryo-Ohki hung her head. She felt like crying. "Maybe... maybe I'll just run away from home."

"Ryo-Ohki-dono!?" Azaka exclaimed. "The other one is just a baby, is she not? Come now, you are the elder—show some maturity..."

"I don't have a little sister like that!" Ryo-Ohki pouted and jumped off Azaka's head. "I hate baby cats! They can't talk, they're violent, and they don't listen when you tell them anything! That's it. I'm running away. Tell Sasami-chan goodbye for me!"

Ryo-Ohki bolted, let out a loud "Meow!", and leaped into the air. In an instant, she transformed into her core crystal and expanded explosively.

MEOWWWWW!!

With one last sorrowful howl, Ryo-Ohki, now in the form of a spaceship, blasted off, shaking the freezing night atmosphere.

"Ryo-Ohki-dono!"

"Return at once!" Azaka and Kamidake floated up, forgetting they were supposed to be gateposts.

"Ryo-chan!?" Sasami, who had been playing with the kitten on her lap, jumped up and ran to the window. "No way..." She hurried to open the glass door. "Ryoko-oneechan, Ryo-chan is...!"

"Hm?" Ryoko stood there with her mouth agape, watching her own spaceship transform and take off without asking its master for permission. "What is that idiot doing!?"

Suddenly, the kitten that had been twitching its ears on the sofa came running over.

"Peep?"

The sharp prow of Ryo-Ohki glittered against the thin crescent moon in the distance. The kitten stood on her tiptoes, pressing her hands against the window glass, gazing at the moon. She let out a high-pitched "peep" and leaped out into the garden in the blink of an eye.

"Ah, Misoka-chan!"

The kitten glanced back at Sasami once, then bolted and disappeared into the shadows of the shrubbery.

"Wait! Where are you going!?" Sasami tried to jump into the garden in her slippers, but Ayeka caught her.

"You must not."

"But..."

"You'll catch a cold going out into the night air!"

"But Misoka-chan..."

"She always goes out to the garden to do her business. It's fine, she'll be back soon."

"But..."

Just then, Azaka and Kamidake approached from the direction of the front entrance, sliding low over the ground.

"It's a disaster!"

"Ryo-Ohki-dono... has run away from home!"

"Ehh!?" Sasami's eyes went round as she looked at her sister, then at Ryoko.

Ryo-Ohki had passed the stratosphere and continued to climb.

What should I do...!?

She had rushed out, but she had nowhere to go. After leaving Earth's gravity and reaching a distance where the scarred face of the moon was visible, Ryo-Ohki slowed her speed.

Being alone... it's been a long time.

Switching the screen to the rear view, the Earth—now shrinking—flew into her field of vision.

It's already gotten so small...

She could just keep going... Ryo-Ohki muttered, changed her course, and entered lunar orbit. She descended slowly toward the surface. Kicking up dry dust as she landed, Ryo-Ohki shifted back into her small, cat-rabbit form. Even if her shape was animal, her nature was that of a spaceship, so she didn't suffer from a lack of air or anything of the sort.

Leaving footprints like plum blossoms on the lunar surface, Ryo-Ohki began to trudge up a small hill. Reaching the wide plateau at the top, she sat down and gazed at the round, blue planet she had just left. The third planet from the sun: Earth.

Okayama is down there, and the Masaki house... and Sasami-chan.

Sasami-chan...

The planet, wrapped in soft blue, looked exactly the same size as Sasami's head.

If only it had two red pom-poms on the sides and two light blue tails, it would be Sasami-chan...

Ryo-Ohki remembered Sasami's warmth and her small hands. Those small, busy hands that would pick her up and feed her carrots. When she jumped on top of her head, it was always so warm, especially in winter. When she got sleepy and looked like she was going to fall, Sasami would gently pick her up and take her to the most comfortable spot in the house—on the hemp mat in the shade of a potted plant in summer, or on the sheepskin cushion away from the stove in winter. She knew perfectly well that being right in front of the stove would make it too hot to sleep.

I'm such a spoiled brat.

The blue planet blurred and shook as it twinkled. Sasami-chan was trying so hard to take care of the kitten. *I* was the one who picked the kitten up; *I* should be the one taking care of her.

Sitting on this dry, dead satellite with no wind, no air, and no water, she felt an unbearable longing for the green of Earth. *Space... right, it's always like this. It's either pitch black and frozen solid, or it's glaring and hot enough to melt, with no middle ground. No carrot fields, no green carpets swaying in the wind. Just nothing, until you hit a convenience station or a spaceship.*

Ryo-Ohki imagined herself flying straight on forever through that pitch-black space. She imagined herself jumping into a sector of space unknown, shaking off the cold gaze of the stars, where even Ryoko's voice couldn't reach her. Ryo-Ohki shuddered and flattened her ears. Without even realizing it, her fur was standing on end.

But I said I was running away!

Ryo-Ohki frantically rubbed her eyes, forcing the shimmering blue planet out of her view. *If I go back like this, Sasami-chan will laugh at me. That tiny kitten will definitely make fun of me, too. No... Ryo-Ohki will... Ryo-Ohki will be the rabbit on the moon!*

Ryo-Ohki turned around and started running, kicking up dry soil. *Sasami-chan is an idiot! The tiny cat is an idiot! Ryo-Ohki is an idiot...!*

"What do you think you're doing!!"

An astral link cut straight into her mind.

"Eek!?"

She slammed on the brakes, sending a cloud of dry dust billowing up. She looked back, trembling.

"What are you staring at out here?"

Ryoko was looking down, grinning. She had her arms crossed just like she did in the living room, and the tail accessory was wiggling. "That's a pretty short 'runaway' trip, huh?"

Ryo-Ohki's fur puffed up. "Me-me-meow..."

"Just 'looking around,' huh? Heh..." Ryoko descended through the air, grinning wider. "You sure? Sasami-chan was crying. And that tiny cat went off somewhere, too."

"Meow!?"

"Well, see ya." Ryoko stopped just a head's height above Ryo-Ohki, gave a wicked grin, and vanished.

"Meow-meow!?" Ryo-Ohki's claws clawed fruitlessly at the air, stirring up more dry dust.

Sasami-chan was!? Sasami-chan was crying!?

"MEOWWWWW!!"

With one cry, Ryo-Ohki instantly reverted to her spaceship form and launched.

"Sasami! Sasami, dear!" Ayeka rubbed Sasami's back with a troubled expression, looking out the window and then back at her sister. "Tenchi-sama has gone to look for her now, so it's alright, she'll be back soon."

"N-no, that's not it!" Sasami choked on a sob, new tears welling up. "Sasami... Ryo-chan... about Ryo-chan..."

"Eh?" Ayeka looked around the house in a panic, feeling like she wanted to cry too, and pressed her nose against Sasami's head. "Did Ryo-chan go out because Sasami was only petting Misoka-chan?"

Sasami suddenly lifted her head, nearly flattening Ayeka's nose.

"T-that's not true!"

The tear welling in the corner of Ayeka's eye was probably just from bumping her nose.

"Running away is a lie. She just went for a walk by herself. She'll come back when she feels better. Sasami, don't you have times when you want to do that too?"

"But Kamidake said she ran away..." Sasami's tears spilled over. "Ryo-chan... waaaah..." She buried her face in her sister's chest and began to sob. Ayeka, forgetting the pain in her nose, began frantically rubbing Sasami's back again. *I wonder where Ryoko-san went off to at a time like this!?* she muttered to herself, reaching for a tissue and thinking she should have at least called back her own spaceship.

Ryoko herself was sitting cross-legged on the roof of the Masaki house, looking up at the crescent moon, thin as a cat's fang. "Damn idiot... making me jump all the way out there. Now I'm hungry again."

Tenchi, wearing a *hanten* jacket over his sweatshirt, was peering into the shrubbery around the garden. "Misoka-chan... where did you go...?" He had searched from the street to the backyard, but the kitten was nowhere to be found. "I should have put a bell on her," he grumbled, brushing dead leaves off his knees.

Suddenly, a thought crossed his mind: *Maybe she went back to where she was before?* Where she was before meant Grandpa's shrine. *No way, to a place that*

far away... But, if the kitten had followed Ryo-Ohki, wouldn't it make sense that she went to the place where they first met? "No, that's not it," he thought. *Maybe she just thought Ryo-Ohki would be there if she went back?*

"Azaka, Kamidake, I'm going over to Grandpa's place," Tenchi said, tilting his head as he stepped out the front door and began walking toward the stone steps leading to the shrine. A moment later, he heard a faint "As you wish" in reply.

The kitten was climbing the stone steps with desperate intensity, digging her claws in, jumping up, tumbling down, and leaping again. It was a climb far too heavy for a kitten's size and stamina. She climbed toward the summit without a single glance aside, her thin tail lashing like a whip.

"Misoka-chaaan," Tenchi began walking up the steps slowly, looking around. "There's no way she climbed all the way up here," he muttered, peering into the bushes. *If I have to go back and say I couldn't find her, Sasami-chan will cry again*... There is nothing sadder than a pet going missing. Just not coming home for dinner makes one's mind race with bad scenarios. Unlike a tied-up dog or a caged bird, cats come and go freely, which makes it all the more worrying. *What if she really never comes back!?*

Tenchi tried to shake the dark thoughts away and began climbing faster. Then, a sound like wind being cut erupted, and a massive spaceship burst from a rift in space.

"Ryo-Ohki!?"

Ryo-Ohki, casting a shadow over Tenchi's head, attempted to descend toward the pond but suddenly made an emergency maneuver in mid-air. Like a film played in reverse, she headed back toward the shrine.

"What is going on!?" Tenchi began running up the steps, skipping one at a time.

"Peeep!?" The kitten, who had been sitting alone in the middle of the shrine grounds looking up at the sky, saw the giant, spiked object streak overhead at high speed and return. She puffed up every hair on her body. "Piiii~~!!" She bolted across the gravel, heart-in-mouth, and dived under the veranda.

The giant object touched down with a ground-shaking thud, scattering gravel.

"What's all this ruckus!?" Katsuhito poked his head out from the shrine office window.

"MEOWWWWW!!" The spaceship form vanished, and Ryo-Ohki appeared. The kitten peered out from under the veranda, eyes round, and froze in fear.

"MEOWWWWW! MEOWWWWW!" Ryo-Ohki looked around, calling the kitten's name, stopping to sniff the ground beneath her feet.

"P... Piii~~~!!"

Suddenly, the kitten bolted. She ran across the gravel, tumbling as she rushed toward her.

"Meow!" The kitten and Ryo-Ohki reached out their paws to embrace... but instead, they collided head-on and went flying at the same time.

"Miiyagh!" "Pii!"

Ryo-Ohki shook her fur to clear the gravel, walked up to the kitten, and began licking her fluffy fur.

"Piii..." The kitten closed her eyes in bliss and rubbed her head against Ryo-Ohki's paw.

"Oh, Tenchi!"

"Grandpa..." Katsuhito, who had come out of the office, squatted down next to the two, ignoring Tenchi, who stood there with wide eyes.

"There, there. You're both such good kids."

Sasami, who had rushed out of the house and sprinted up the stone steps while out of breath, saw the two and rushed toward them as if tumbling forward. "Ryo-chan! Misoka-chan!!"

"Meow!!"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, Ryo-chan. Sasami hasn't been petting you at all. I'll never do it again. I love you, Ryo-chan."

"Meowww..." Ryo-Ohki, held tight by Sasami, closed her eyes with a melting expression.

"Piii~?" The kitten, whose playmate had been suddenly snatched away, dug her claws into Sasami's clothes and reached up, begging for attention.

"Misoka-chan, let's go home together. Let's sleep together♡" Sasami picked up the kitten with one hand and held her gently alongside Ryo-Ohki.

"Looks like this one failed at being a moon rabbit," a voice said. Tenchi turned to see Ryoko standing there, arms crossed, smirking. *What is she talking about, 'moon rabbit'?* Tenchi thought, but seeing Sasami's happy face, he decided not to ask any unnecessary questions.

SUBJECT:

To Father

Father, yoo-hoo! It’s cold here, but Sasami is doing great. Oh, and Sister, Tenchi-niichan, and Ryoko-oneechan are all doing great, too!

The other day, I wrote an essay for my Japanese homework. It was an assignment to write a short story. So, I wrote about Ryo-chan and the kitten. My teacher praised it! Yuki-chan said it was interesting, too. Oh, Yuki-chan is my friend, and we are super-duper-ultra close. You know, the girl with the short hair who was sitting next to me during the class observation? Do you remember?

Also, there’s Marina-chan, Yuko-chan, and Haruka-chan. We’re going to have a kick-base match soon, so we’ve been practicing together, and we play Pokémon at home. But since everyone likes the outdoors, we spend most of our time playing in the schoolyard. You know, kick-base is a sport that’s like a mix of baseball and soccer, and it takes the fun parts of both! I’ll teach you how to play next time.

And let's see... oh, right! Right now, Yuki-chan, Marina-chan, and I are making a Secret Everything Notebook. We write about which boys and girls in class are in love, how to make tasty tea, and researching pet names. We started a "Secret Investigation Team," Sasami and the others did! It’s super interesting because we’ve found out so many things!

Because of that, Sasami is very busy every day. I want to tell you about so many more things, Father, but I get sleepy so fast at night. But I’ll do my best to write another letter soon. Please write back to me, too!

P.S. I’m sending you my 100-point test (Yay!) and the 3rd-grade class anthology that has my essay in it. Can you send me some Juraisn sweets as a reward? I love you, love you, love you so much, Father, Mother Misaki, Mother Funaho, please take care of us♡

— Sasami

There is one day a year when New Year’s cards fly across Japan—that is New Year’s Day. There are two seasons a year when parcel deliveries bustle across Japan—those are mid-summer and year-end. (Incidentally, those are mainly *ochugen* and *oseibo* gifts).

Besides that, there are many seasonal traditions in this country, such as the day mountains of horse-racing tickets fly through the air at Nakayama at the end of the year, or the day mountains of beer are poured over athletes' heads. But let’s focus on a major event that is fast approaching.

February 14th. That is Valentine’s Day.

Originally, "Valentine" is the English reading of Saint Valentino, and Valentine’s Day is the memorial day for that saint. It is the anniversary of Bishop Valentino, who was martyred in Rome around the mid-3rd century. However, this day has become established in Japan as a day where chocolate flies across the country. Needless to say, it is an important anniversary where women give chocolate to men and, at the same time, confess their love. Since Saint Valentino is the patron saint of lovers, it makes sense, but the chocolate aspect could be called a conspiracy by the confectionery industry. Especially when you hear that most of the annual chocolate sales are concentrated in this season, you can see why.

The introduction is long, so let’s get to it. In the familiar Masaki household, the women were each hatching their own secret plans for the upcoming memorial day. By "each," I mean Ryoko, Ayeka, Sasami, and Washu. If you include Kiyone and Mihoshi, who are currently boarding away from the house, that makes six women diligently plotting to target a single objective.

The target is, of course, our protagonist, Tenchi Masaki. But while the others were busy, Tenchi was sitting in the middle of the field, staring blankly at the sky, oblivious to the impending emergency tomorrow.

The February sky was cloudless and piercingly blue. A deep chill crept up from the earth he had cultivated so diligently. Far above his head, a kite, looking almost like a solid black silhouette, circled slowly. If you saw him with his eyes narrowed and his knees pulled to his chest, gazing intently at the sky, you might think he was composing a *haiku*, but in reality, he was just staring. Or, to be precise, you couldn't even call it staring. "State of no-mind" sounds good, but in short, he had emptied his head and was surrendering both body and

mind to nature. If you measured his brainwaves, you would surely see alpha waves.

The reason Tenchi comes to the field every day, even when there isn't much work to be done in the winter, is precisely for this reason. A modest, private time. Having lost his mother early, raised by his father, and being an only child, Tenchi wasn't really a dexterous type to begin with. Being the center of women's gazes, being constantly watched, is more exhausting than one might think. Though, one might say that’s a luxury to complain about.

"...Oof, it's cold..." Tenchi returned to reality, stretched his stiffening body, and stood up. "What am I doing..." He surveyed the familiar scenery and brushed the dirt off his pants. *I wonder if I'll be bombarded with chocolate tomorrow,* Tenchi thought, hoping they would at least be small ones. If he were gifted a heart-shaped chocolate bigger than his face... well, that was the honest truth of it.

Meanwhile, in the kitchen of the Masaki household, the situation was unfolding exactly as Tenchi feared.

"Sister, even if you make such a huge chocolate, I don't think Tenchi-niichan can finish it."

"That’s fine!" Ayeka retorted with a determined tone, pouring melted *couverture* into a giant heart-shaped cake mold.

"What are you making, Sasami? Chocolate tempura?"

"No way," her sister answered with a dumbfounded look. "I'm making fruit dipped in chocolate. If he gets tired of the chocolate, he can still eat the fruit, and other people can share it, too, right?"

"That’s true." Ayeka was impressed by her sister’s thoughtfulness. If everyone were going to give chocolate, Sasami’s strategy was a winning one. By subtly differentiating herself, she would garner more attention. This kind of innate resourcefulness is unique to the youngest sibling.

"But I am fine with this." Ayeka muttered, taking the heart-shaped chocolate out of the mold and beginning the decoration. She was squeezing out white chocolate with meticulous care. As the surface of the heart was filled with

Juraian characters that looked like mystical Sanskrit, the chocolate began to take on a rather ominous appearance.

"With love to Tenchi-sama" — From Ayeka

That was all it said, but because it was written in Juraian characters, it looked like a talisman used by an *onmyoji* to curse a political rival. Of course, since Valentine's chocolates themselves are gifted with the purpose of binding an uncertain, invisible passion like "love" to the partner, writing a lucky incantation on it is perfectly logical.

"Tch! How lame." Ryoko, having been beaten to the punch by Ayeka, wrinkled her nose and spat the moment she peeked into the kitchen. "Love should be about *love*, not stuff. It’s not about the object, it’s about the heart."

It seemed Ryoko had also been secretly planning to make homemade chocolate. But not confident in making it by herself, she had wanted to have Sasami make it for her. In fact, what Ryoko had in mind was a heart-shaped chocolate bigger than her face, with "LOVE!" written in big pink letters.

"What's wrong, Ryoko-oneechan? Do you want to make it together?" Sasami, unaware of Ryoko’s complicated feelings, asked innocently.

"I don't need chocolate. I have my own way." Ryoko waved her hand dismissively, left the kitchen, and kicked open the door to Washu's lab. "Yo! Are you here? If you are, lend me your face for a second!"

"Oh, Ryoko-san," George, who was unusually present in the lab, greeted her.

"What is it, you? You aren't going to help me make chocolate, are you?" George, who had been looking quite bored watching a variety show on the Galactic Network, stood up, leaving the monitor on. "This appears to be a love spell, so I thought it better if I didn't get involved."

"Hmph..." Ryoko looked around the empty lab. "Where the hell did that Washu bastard go? You don't think she's hiding somewhere making a giant chocolate robot, do you?"

"What, you want me to make a giant chocolate robot?" The master of the room appeared from another lab via a sub-space conduit. "It’s easy to make, but I don't think bigger is necessarily better." She said something surprisingly sensible for a genius scientist. "Yeah, but I don't mind making it for you," Washu smirked. "You just need to program it to chase Tenchi-dono, right? But there’s a problem with the structural integrity. If you prioritize mobility, it might not be very edible."

"Who said I wanted you to make one!?" Ryoko scrambled to reply. Truth be told, she had started to want one for herself.

"Then how about a chocolate spaceship?" The genius scientist continued with an indifferent face. "Or maybe build a chocolate house and have Tenchi-dono live in it?"

"You're the one who said bigger isn't always better!"

"You just like big things, don't you?"

Ryoko fell silent in response to that truly insightful retort.

"If you don't like something huge, how about a micro-chocolate virus? Once Tenchi-dono's hands touch anything, a sensory receptor activates and it instantly turns into chocolate. Yeah, that might be kind of fun."

Ryoko couldn't help but imagine the world once she unleashed the micro-chocolate virus. If he woke up in the morning to brush his teeth, the toothbrush would be chocolate. The toothpaste would, of course, be chocolate paste. If he tried to wash his face, the tap water would be iced cocoa, and the towel would be a chocolate bar. If he tried to eat breakfast, the rice bowl would turn into chocolate, and the rice would be chocolate rice. The rolled omelet would be a chocolate roll, and the miso soup would be hot cocoa with marshmallows. The *natto* would probably have chocolate beans pulling strings of chocolate. The salted salmon would naturally be a slice of chocolate, which he'd have to eat with Pocky chopsticks.

"Ugh..." Ryoko groaned, feeling rather sick. "Washu, you bastard—if you’re just messing with me, I’ll really kill you."

"The problem is that you wouldn't be able to take a bath, though," Washu countered. The moment she said it, a vivid image flashed through Ryoko's mind: Tenchi submerged in a sea of melted chocolate. Even if he managed to escape the bath, it would be too much if his clothes were made of chocolate, too.

"Forget it," Ryoko said, her face turning pale as she turned to leave the lab.

"I'm kidding, I'm kidding. Ryoko, you came here to ask for something, right?"

Ryoko didn't answer; she just turned back with a look of bitter resentment.

"I know what you want. You want something that’s guaranteed to work, right? A so-called 'love potion.'"

"I-I-I don't know what you're..." The fact that she reflexively denied it was Ryoko's best quality.

"And you insist on it being chocolate."

"....."

Even a former space pirate who had once made the seven seas tremble was no match for her creator and mother.

"Don't worry. Washu-chan will make you a super-ultra-mega effective love potion... I mean, love chocolate."

"Changed my mind," Ryoko shrugged. "It’s beneath someone like me, Ryoko-sama, to rely on things or people. I don't need anything, so Washu, don't you go doing anything unnecessary." With that, she turned and promptly marched out of the lab.

"She’s such a helpless child, isn't she, George?" Washu watched Ryoko's retreating figure with a look of feigned exasperation, but when she caught George’s eye, she gave him a sly grin. "Having been told that much, I can't just keep quiet, you know."

"My lady!?" George stood up abruptly, blocking the door to the virtual reality system.

"What’s wrong? I haven't even said anything yet, have I?"

"My apologies," George replied, bowing deeply.

"What are you talking about? I’m going this way," Washu said, opening a door to a suspicious, recently added lab, and vanished.

Meanwhile, at the Three Stars convenience store:

"Mihoshi-kun, add some more stock where the chocolate shelf is empty," Manager Hoshiura, their employer, shouted without looking up from his receipts. "I truly wonder why Valentine's Day ever became a thing... Isn't it pitiful for those who don't get a single thing? Even if you get 'courtesy' chocolate, it’s not exactly joyful. And on top of that, these days people say you have to give something back, too. It’s just a hassle for men."

"Is that you talking, old man?" his son, Satoru, entered the stockroom in an apron. "Don't grumble. I'll share the chocolate I get with you." He seemed to have stopped wearing London Boots, but his hair was still blonde and long.

"I don't need your charity; by the day after tomorrow, there'll be leftovers on sale anyway," Yujiro Hoshiura frowned, hunching over his receipts. "Seasonal goods are unavoidable. By the way, Satoru, do you really get chocolate? From whom?"

"Women all over Japan send chocolate to my agency. Enough to scoop up with a bulldozer. That's why I have to issue statements saying, 'I appreciate your sentiments, fans, but please donate that money to people in need.'" Satoru flipped his blonde hair and looked around the cramped warehouse. (You might remember him: Satoru Hoshiura is the only man on Earth who served as Ryoko’s backup musician.)

"Satoru, are you still saying that stuff?" Yujiro, who had stopped to listen to his son, clutched his head and started recalculating. "Enough with the daydreaming, and work seriously like Kiyone-san."

"Oh my, but having dreams is wonderful, isn't it?" Kiyone entered after swapping shifts with Mihoshi at the register. "I don't have any dreams or hopes, so I envy Satoru-san."

Satoru smiled, walked out of the warehouse, and returned after grabbing the two most expensive chocolates from the shelves. "Here. You're going to that

monster house the day after tomorrow, right? Take these as a souvenir. And tell that girl with the light blue hair that I'm always waiting for her." Perhaps embarrassed, he left it at that and disappeared back into the warehouse.

"Thank you. Even if the world ends tomorrow, I'll be sure to deliver it," Kiyone said, clutching the expensive chocolate with its faux-rose decoration, and turned back to the manager. "This... is it really okay?"

"That idiot son of mine," Yujiro finally started to laugh. "Kiyone-san, that's just his way of showing consideration. But if I had to voice a wish, I'd be happy if a level-headed person like you were to come to me."

"Oh, me...?" Kiyone blushed. "I'll return to the store." With a slight bow, she left the warehouse feeling strangely ticklish. *Valentine's is such a sinful event... both boys and girls waiting for tomorrow's miracle with bated breath. Satoru-san, too—even though he knows it's unrequited... Can a miracle of love really happen? Do I even have the right to give chocolate to Tenchi-san?*

"Ah, the restroom..." Having returned to the store, she finally remembered her immediate purpose. "Mihoshi, just a second."

"Thank you very much. Please do your best for Valentine's tomorrow!" At the register, Mihoshi was showering customers with an angelic smile as she blessed them for buying chocolate.

The next day—Valentine's Day.

When Tenchi, having overslept, finished his morning preparations and went downstairs, Ayeka and Sasami were already at the table. In front of Katsuhito and Nobuyuki were two small ribboned boxes each.

"Oh, you're a bit late today. I already got mine. From Ayeka-san and Sasami-chan," Nobuyuki said, showing off his boxes happily, while Katsuhito sipped his tea with his usual poker face.

"Indeed. So this is what they call 'courtesy chocolate.' Well, it pays to live a long life."

"Brother!" Ayeka laughed with a troubled expression, stood up, and walked over to Tenchi, carrying a large box. "Tenchi-sama, this is a token of my feelings. Please, accept it."

"Oh, thank you." As he unwound the gold cord and the colorful wrapping paper associated with the Juraian Royal Family, a white wood box appeared. Opening the lid revealed a giant heart-shaped chocolate inscribed with Juraian characters.

"I imagine you must think it strange. But I felt that expressing my heart in the characters of the homeland where I was born and raised was the most appropriate thing to do."

"You did this, Ayeka-san...?" Tenchi murmured, genuinely touched. "Wasn't it very difficult? I... I shouldn't just keep it tucked away, should I? I'll eat it little by little."

"Thank you." Ayeka blushed and turned to urge her sister on.

"Tenchi-niichan, wait just a moment!" Sasami ran to the kitchen and returned with a glass plate from the refrigerator. "Here, this is for you!"

She removed the plastic wrap to reveal colorful fruits coated in white chocolate, glistening in the morning sun.

"Whoa... it’s beautiful. Did you make this, Sasami-chan?"

"It’s easy! I just looked at a book called 'Easy Valentine’s Sweets' and followed the instructions."

"I see." Tenchi picked up a white-chocolate-covered strawberry and popped it into his mouth. "Mmm, delicious! There’s too much for me to eat by myself; mind if I share some with Father and Grandpa?"

"Sure! I made it so everyone could eat it together." Sasami smiled brightly and grabbed a chocolate-covered banana for herself.

"Mind if I have some, too?"

"Of course! The person who made it is allowed to eat, too. Now, I'm going to eat my breakfast." Tenchi sat at the table with the glass plate, and thanks to Sasami's fruit, the Masaki family breakfast turned into a very luxurious affair.

"Come to think of it, what about Ryoko? And Washu-san isn't here either," Tenchi asked Ayeka, who was re-brewing tea, after Nobuyuki left for his office and Katsuhito went to the shrine office.

"I'm not sure... neither of them came for breakfast. Here you go, Tenchi-sama."

"Washu-san is one thing, but Ryoko is rare." Tenchi sipped his tea casually, then suddenly froze as he realized the situation he was in. Alone with Ayeka in the soft morning light... drinking tea after breakfast and exchanging casual conversation as if they had been a married couple for years...

"A-Ayeka-san, the... um..."

"Yes?" She answered at the perfect moment.

"Is the tea... too hot?"

"No, that's not it..." Tenchi was lost for words. Only a fool, a shameless person, or someone in a teen drama could look someone in the eye at a time like this and say "You look beautiful."

"I just thought... Ayeka-san, you've changed a little." Tenchi had thought about it long and hard, but he felt he'd just said something even more foolish than the three options combined. Ayeka waited, head tilted, for him to continue.

"I mean, you used to be more on edge, or maybe more tightly wound..." Ayeka's expression grew slightly suspicious. "W-well, that might not be true, and it was just me thinking that, but..." Tenchi wanted to dive into the deepest, widest hole he could find. "But really, lately, Ayeka-san, you have such a gentle face. It's not just that you're gentle—it's like you've become stronger, or more calm... I think you've become beautiful."

The moment he finished, Tenchi realized he was a fool, shameless, and practically a walking teen drama. *It's over,* he thought. *Whether she laughs, gets angry, or runs away, this miraculous time will burst and vanish.*

"Thank you."

"Huh?" Tenchi asked reflexively.

"I never imagined you would say something like that. I'm so happy..." Ayeka looked down shyly, wrapping both hands around her teacup. "I thought you would laugh at me, Tenchi-sama. The chocolate is so big, and it didn't turn out well... In fact, Ryoko-san already laughed at me. But I thought it was pointless to put on airs. I decided to be honest with myself, even if I was laughed at... I'm truly happy."

Ayeka looked up and smiled bashfully. With her cheeks dyed a pale pink like a maiden camellia and her lustrous black hair shining in the soft morning light, her smile pierced deep into Tenchi's chest.

"Thank you, Tenchi-sama. If I have changed, it is all thanks to you."

"Ayeka-san..." One phrase nearly escaped his lips.

Let's get married.

Skipping past "I like you" and "I love you," going straight to a proposal. Ayeka in a white *shiromuk* (wedding kimono) with red lipstick, holding a vermilion sake cup with her slender, white fingers—and him in a formal crested *hakama*, with Grandpa officiating in his priest's robes. The image flashed through his mind so vividly that Tenchi stared at Ayeka's face, forgetting even to breathe.

"Don't say anything." Ayeka whispered, cutting off his words as she gently placed her right hand over his left. "I am very happy right now. If I put it into words, I feel like this happiness will break."

Tenchi nodded silently. He might have been able to say it just now. The words were right behind his sealed lips; all he had to do was let them free.

Everything would change.

Ayeka might leave the Juraian Royal Family. I might leave this country—this planet. And Ryoko...

At that moment, a wind blowing across the stars swept through Tenchi's chest. An image burned into his mind: Ryoko, her golden eyes filled with intense light, her light-blue hair flowing behind her as she stared into the far reaches of

space, lit by the countless stars of the dark sea. She was staring straight ahead, as lonely and straight as a drawn sword. It was as if she were saying that she had no place for herself on this earth.

Then, the soft sensation on his hand vanished. Tenchi snapped back to reality to see Ayeka smiling, her hands clasped against her chest.

"The tea has gone cold, hasn't it?" Ayeka looked away, set the teacup down with graceful movements, and stood up. "I will go re-brew it now."

Tenchi could say nothing as he watched her go. Something inexpressible surged within his chest, making his body tremble. "That's alright. I'm going out to the field." With that, he hurried out the front door.

His feet didn't head for the field; before he knew it, they were walking toward the hill behind the house. He hadn't decided to go anywhere in particular, but his feet were set on the shrine. There was no one around the cave that stood like a stone stage above the shrine. Tenchi, feeling both relieved and disappointed, climbed the cave, which was three times his height, and sat on top, looking around. As he sat in the quiet cave, where only the sound of birds could be heard, he felt the restless pain in his heart begin to calm.

How old am I? Aren't I still just a kid? Who am I? Don't I still not even know myself? I certainly have a mysterious power. The power Mom left me. But what will I do with that power? Use it for myself, or to protect someone? Even though I don't even know that, I was about to say those important words...

But then, a thought—almost like regret—gently brushed through his mind: *This was for the best*. He hadn't said anything. Ayeka hadn't asked anything. That mysterious time might have just been a dream shown to them by the magic words written in chocolate. *I didn't know that a festival from a foreign land called Valentine's Day could be this bittersweet, Mom...*

Just then, he thought he heard the faint sound of a bell.

"Chibi!?" Tenchi instinctively turned around, calling the name of his missing pet cat.

"What are you doing in a place like this?"

It was Ryoko's voice! With a *whoosh*, the high branches swayed, and Ryoko leaped down, landing with cat-like grace beside him. "Did you have a fight with Ayeka? You've got such a brooding look on your face."

"It's nothing like that." Tenchi's cheeks softened. "What about you, Ryoko? Up there in the treetops?"

"I came to breathe some fresh air. The house smells like chocolate—I feel like I'm going to get cavities just breathing in there."

"Yeah," Tenchi laughed, feeling the tension drain from his shoulders. "I didn't know you hated chocolate."

"Hmm? I don't hate it or anything, it's just... I don't really vibe with the whole 'casting spells on plain chocolate' or 'tying it up with ribbons' thing."

"I see." Tenchi smiled. It was Ryoko's signature rhetoric. She was even more shy than he was. "Ayeka-san gave me a chocolate bigger than my face." Why was he telling her this? Maybe it was because he could talk to Ryoko about anything.

"Did you come all the way out here just to brag about that?"

"Sasami-chan also gave me fruit wrapped in chocolate."

"I know. I was watching the whole time yesterday." Ryoko suddenly grabbed Tenchi by the forehead and pushed him over backward. "Look, you *did* come here to brag!"

"Ow... you hit my head!" Tenchi shoved her hand away and sat up, rubbing the back of his head.

"Go have Sasami-chan put some chocolate on it!"

"Don't go eyeing my chocolate, Ryoko. I'm going to eat it all by myself!"

"If you eat Ayeka's chocolate, you're gonna get diarrhea."

"Ryoko, seriously," Tenchi finally laughed. "You're a girl, stop talking about diarrhea and poop so casually."

"Who said I did? Tenchi, you're the one who's actually dirty." Ryoko finally laughed, too. "When I was looking down from the top of the tree earlier, it

didn't look any different from a normal day, did it? I prefer festivals to this confusing Valentine's stuff. You can drink and eat grilled squid."

"Maybe we should all go out for *okonomiyaki* sometime." Tenchi looked up at the clear sky, just like yesterday, and realized he'd forgotten something important. "Damn. I forgot to go get fresh carrots for Ryo-Ohki."

"Then I'll just head into town and watch the Valentine's chaos." Ryoko floated upward, looking down with amusement as Tenchi struggled his way down the cave.

"Come back for dinner. Don't cause trouble for Kiyone-san and the others."

"Shut up." Ryoko called back from the air and vanished on the wind.

"Oh well..." As Tenchi slowly walked down the path, he hoped that these unremarkable days, colored by the changing seasons, would continue gently tomorrow, and the day after that. *Maybe I'm not cut out for adventures or romance after all*.

At that moment, Ryoko suddenly appeared in the storage room of Konbini Three Stars, nearly stopping the heart of the not-so-young manager.

"Yo! Long time, no see. You been well?"

"A-an alien space pirate!?" Hearing the manager's voice, Kiyone came flying from the register. "R-Ryoko-san!? What are you doing here!?"

"Came to shop. What do you think I came here for?"

"Oh, Ryoko-san! We were planning on heading over there this evening!" Even Mihoshi left the register, forcing the manager to abandon his receipts and rush over.

"Oh! A miracle!?" The son ran in as Yujiro Hoshiura, the manager, was walking out. "Ryoko-san, so glad you could make it. Take anything you like. I'll even give you some chocolate!" Satoru Hoshiura pulled Ryoko's hand, leading her out of the warehouse, crying tears of joy. "I wonder if my prayers were answered? Whenever I think you'll come, you always show up when I'm not here. You're

here to buy chocolate, right? I get it. There's plenty of beautiful chocolate over there."

"Nope. I came to get a bento." Ryoko stacked a short-rib bento, a *makunouchi* bento, and a large helping of yakisoba from the shelf and handed them to Satoru. "Can you warm these up for me?"

"Sure thing, coming right up." Satoru rushed to the microwave, shoved them in, and closed the door. "Ryoko-san, have you been singing lately? Want to have another session with me?"

"Yeah, maybe if I'm in the mood." Ryoko answered, beginning to browse the chocolate shelf carefully.

"You can take the biggest one, you know," Satoru shouted, feeling nervous.

"Really?" Ryoko picked up a medium-sized heart chocolate and threw a thousand-yen bill on the counter. "This is all I brought, unfortunately."

With Mihoshi, Kiyone, Satoru, and the manager watching with wide eyes, Ryoko unwrapped the chocolate and began munching on it loudly. "What? What are you all staring at?"

"Ryoko-san, that... isn't that for Tenchi-kun?" Satoru stacked the warmed-up bentos in front of her.

"Who said that? That cheap little festival has nothing to do with me." Ryoko cracked the heart chocolate in half and shoved it in front of Satoru. "Consider it a tip. Keep it." Ignoring Satoru, who was stunned, Ryoko grabbed her bentos, smirked, and vanished.

"I'll be back!" Ryoko's voice reached Satoru's reddening ears just as she teleported.

"It's so boring today." Washu, who had been lounging on the lab couch watching the Galaxy Super Bowl, turned around when she noticed George's gaze.

"My lady, you didn't do anything in the end."

"What, you think I should have?" A smile played on her lips. "It's best to leave the kids to themselves. Don't you think?"

"As you wish." George handed Washu a truffle he had secretly made for this day.

"You're good. That’s what makes you Washu-chan's butler." Washu enjoyed the cherry-liqueur-infused chocolate with satisfaction, offering a prime smile to her loyal servant.

TO: Ryoko-san (Private)

Ryoko-san, this is Satoru Hoshiura, out of the blue. Thank you for coming to Three Stars for Valentine’s the other day. I was so happy. You were as energetic and powerful as ever, which was a relief.

Are you still singing lately? I started helping my dad with the shop after I got back here, so the Tokyo band broke up, and I'm having trouble finding good members. I’d be so happy if you’d join us again. Your look and your vocals—the world really wouldn't be able to leave you alone.

By the way, I’ve started listening to all kinds of music, not just heavy metal. Your voice has such a wide range, I thought maybe you could sing other stuff, too. I've really broadened my horizons. World music, pop, oldies, salsa, Latin, reggae—I even listened to traditional folk songs the other day. I'm okay with everything except my dad’s *enka*, but if you sang that, it would have some serious destructive power... thinking that made me laugh right in the middle of a delivery.

Enka-Metal is something nobody's done yet, so it might just work. You'd be called a "Supernova of the Enka World," and your concerts would be so intense people might get heart attacks or strokes, making you the most dangerous *enka* singer in Japan. On the flip side, maybe the power of your singing could blow away blood clots and cholesterol, curing the audience’s illnesses! At that point, you’d be a full-fledged cult leader, right?

Ah, sorry. I might be writing something crazy.

Anyway, I’m not used to writing letters, so I’m not sure what I’m saying, but thank you again for the other day. I was genuinely happy about the heart chocolate you gave me. I was happier than I would have been with any other chocolate. I never thought you’d come to the shop and give *me* chocolate.

White Day is coming up soon, so I’m sending some candy via Kiyone-san. There are a lot of girls there, so I thought an assortment would be better. Come show your face again!

- SATORU, Lead Guitarist, Three Stars

Heavenly Maiden

The dream of spring winds blowing the flowers away— even when I wake, my heart remains restless. — Saigyo Hoshi

There was still time before the cherry blossoms bloomed. The wind sometimes carried the sweetness of spring, but it was still too cold to make the buds open.

"When will it be..." Ayeka felt restless every time the flower season came around, several times since she had come to live her noble life in a strange land. *Even though there are buds so swollen they look like they'll bloom at any moment, why is it that I always miss the first flower?*

Ayeka went down to the pond and looked up at the large cherry tree where the demon was said to have appeared. Last year, the branches were so heavy with blooms that they reflected in the pond—it had been magnificent. *It was only after coming to this planet that I learned what cherry blossoms were—to love the flowers and to cherish them.* That was exactly why she wanted to see the moment the first bud opened...

"If only there were no cherry blossoms in this world, the spring heat would be so calm... It's still a bit early for flower viewing."

Turning to the sound of footsteps, she saw Katsuhito—or rather, Yosho, her brother—approaching slowly.

"Brother, did you come to keep watch over the cherry blossoms too?"

"Keep watch?" Katsuhito looked up at the unbloomed branches and smiled. "That's true. I imagine if the cherry blossoms here were visited this often, they would feel like they were being watched."

"Oh my..." Ayeka looked away bashfully and gazed at the quiet water. "What is the meaning of the poem you just recited?"

"It's a poem about a heart like yours." Katsuhito cast a teasing look at her. "When the buds begin to swell, the heart rushes, wondering if they will bloom

now or now. When they bloom, you worry about rain or wind. It means, how calm the heart would be if there were simply no cherry blossoms in this world."

"That... that's too much of an exaggeration." Ayeka glared at him slightly, then looked back at the buds, as if to hide her embarrassment. "I think cherry blossoms wet with rain and cherry blossoms scattered by the wind are both beautiful in their own way."

"You've really settled into this planet, haven't you?" Katsuhito looked up at the cherry blossoms and reached out to check the branches. "Not much longer now. It depends on how you feel when they bloom. If I were a cherry blossom, I'd bloom my first flower when no one was looking."

"You're mean." Ayeka started to laugh and pulled gently on her brother's sleeve. "You know, Brother, I wonder about something. When I lived in the palace on Jurai, I never waited for flowers with such a restless heart. That garden had flowers blooming all year round, and besides, cherry blossoms are... white, aren't they?"

Ayeka narrowed her eyes, looking through the overcast sky. "From the tradition of the Juraian Royal Family, which expresses status by layering colors upon colors, it was a surprise to see such clear, almost colorless flowers look so beautiful."

"It's a matter of 'Is it mist, or is it cloud?'"

Katsuhito answered, stealing a glance at Ayeka's profile. "As the people of old used to say, 'Using the cloudy path of flowers as my guide,' cherry blossoms have long been compared to clouds, or their scattering to snow. Of course, they've also been compared to *kajin*—beautiful women—but well..."

Ayeka braced herself, thinking Katsuhito was about to tease her again, but he just gazed at the overcast sky with an indifferent expression.

"When cherry blossoms open, all sorts of things are drawn to their scent. Demons come, and those from the other world come, too. If you see a strange old man adorned with cherry branches at a viewing party, it might just be the ghost of Narihira."

Seeing Ayeka’s confused face, Katsuhito added, "He was a famous lover who lived in the capital during the Heian period. I didn't know him personally, but he was a massive celebrity."

Watching her brother speak so calmly, Ayeka was reminded of something she often forgot. For over seven hundred years, ever since he came to this planet pursuing the space pirate Ryoko, her brother had lived in this country. He must know many things that she couldn't even begin to imagine.

"Tell me, Brother, what kind of secrets are hidden in this country? Since it captivated you enough to make you stay, there must be many mysterious tales here."

"Who knows?" Katsuhito replied, looking down at his sister's face with affection. "You seem better suited to peach blossoms than cherry blossoms. Cherry blossoms are beautiful, but there is a coldness to that beauty—a transience that feels otherworldly. If I were a poet of old, I wouldn't compare you to a cherry blossom. Yes... there was a good poem..."

Katsuhito looked away, whispering with a dreamy expression. "'The maiden stands upon the path where the peach blossoms, flushed in crimson, bloom in the spring garden.' That girl had clear eyes, and her lustrous black hair was tied back casually. When she smiled, her dignified face softened, rounding like a bud just beginning to bloom. She was just a simple girl, without rank or title."

Katsuhito fell silent there, staring at the water for a long time. "Well, it’s getting cold. Shall we head back? Once the cherry blossoms bloom, we’ll have to prepare for the flower viewing."

Seeing Katsuhito start walking ahead, Ayeka hurried after him. *The peach blossoms flushed in crimson in the spring garden... I wonder when that was, and who that girl was?* Even as she felt her heart flutter, she thought that her brother had chosen that poem just for her, and she stepped through the front door feeling strangely ticklish.

"Oh, Tenchi-sama?"

Seeing Tenchi in the living room when he should have been at the field, Ayeka couldn't help but call out. "What’s wrong? Are you finished for the day?"

"Yeah, just a little," Tenchi said, looking away from the TV screen and smiling to show her it was nothing to worry about. "I think I caught a cold. I just don't have the energy."

"Oh my..." Ayeka hurried to his side, frowning as she pressed her hand against his forehead. "You don't seem to have a fever, but are you in pain anywhere?"

"Now that you mention it, my head feels heavy. It’s nothing major, though." As he started to speak, Tenchi shifted his body as if he just realized something. "Ayeka-san, if this is a cold, you might catch it, so you shouldn't get too close."

"I’m fine," Ayeka said, her expression thoughtful as she pulled her hand away and headed to the kitchen to put the kettle on the stove. "I’ll make you something hot. Would you like some herbal tea?"

"Yeah... sorry." Tenchi stared blankly at the TV, his mind elsewhere, but when Ayeka brought over two mugs, he took a sip of the fragrant tea.

"Whew..." Seeing Tenchi’s complexion look worse than usual, Ayeka rose again. "Are you really okay? Should I bring you some medicine? Would you like to eat something?"

"No, I’m fine. Really. I’ll feel better if I just rest a bit. I wonder why I caught a cold now of all times." Ayeka looked so worried that Tenchi rushed to interrupt, but now that she mentioned it, he felt worse than he had moments ago. "I’m going to go sleep a bit. I'll be up for dinner."

The moment he stood up with his cup, a light wave of dizziness hit him.

"Tenchi-sama!?" The cup tilted dangerously, and a little tea spilled.

"Ah, sorry. Did I spill some?"

"That doesn't matter! Tenchi-sama, you really should see a doctor..."

"I'm fine, really, I'm fine."

While they argued back and forth, they made it up the stairs to his room. When they reached the second floor, a lively voice came from the entryway.

"I’m hooooome! Oh? Sister?"

"Sasami! Could you come here for a second? Tenchi-sama is in trouble!"

"Eh? What, what?" Sasami ran up the stairs with her backpack still on, but tilted her head at the sight of the two bickering. "What happened? Are you guys fighting?"

"No. Tenchi-sama has become ill. Oh, what shall we do!?"

"You're being dramatic," Tenchi said, offering a bitter smile at Sasami's confused face as he opened his door. "I think I just caught a cold. I'm fine, it's nothing serious, so don't you worry."

He waved at Ayeka and Sasami, who were looking at each other, and closed the door with a feeling of apology.

"Whew..." He sighed again as he sat on the bed. *Ayeka-san acting like a mother all of a sudden... she really is a worrier. Am I okay? Being cared for by everyone like this, having Sasami-chan cook for me, being helped by Ryoko... is this really alright? If this is what you call happiness, I guess I'm the luckiest person in the world right now.*

Feeling embarrassed, Tenchi flopped back onto the bed. "Ugh, cold..." *I guess I really did catch a cold. My head is throbbing.* He gave up, burrowed into his futon, curled up, and closed his eyes.

—Minutes, or perhaps hours later.

With the faint scent of flowers, he felt a tightness in his chest and opened his eyes.

"Mist...?"

Something heavy and white hung over his head, gently enveloping his limbs. Then, it broke into countless white fragments and began to tremble.

Cherry blossoms!?

The moment he realized it, a sense of normal perspective returned. Tenchi was lying on his back under a full-blown cherry tree. Through the gaps between the layers of white petals, he could see the overcast sky, giving the area a shaded look like a wash of ink. The surroundings were wrapped in silence—not even the

sound of a bird. In a stillness where sound and light seemed to hold their breath, only the beating of his own heart pulsed in his ears.

"A dream...?" Tenchi's murmur didn't even reach the level of a voice. *Where am I!? The cherry blossoms shouldn't be blooming yet, so why are they hanging so low?* Tenchi tried desperately to retrieve his memories from the bottom of his dim, hazy head.

As if mocking him, the shapes of the trees blurred, and the shadows of the flowers shifted.

"Is it mist, or is it cloud? Using the cloudy path of flowers as my guide..."

Suddenly, a voice like a ringing bell reached him, and as the wind rose, the sounds returned. "How long do you intend to lie there? Come now, wake up."

The girl's voice, which he didn't recognize, called from behind the flowers.

"Who is it!?" Tenchi bolted upright, holding his breath as he looked around frantically.

"Making such a face. Did you think I was a *mononoke* (spirit)?" The girl's voice teased him, shifting location as she laughed and shook the flowers. "I came all this way to play, maybe I should just go home now."

Turning to the light sound of feet stepping on branches, he saw bare feet—whiter than the flowers—shining with soft light as they descended.

"Do you hate cherry blossoms, or do you hate me?"

Suddenly, the girl's feet left the branch and she vanished. Moments later, a faint presence brushed past his hair. "I'm right here, Tenchi."

Seeing the girl sitting on a branch as if buried in flowers, Tenchi gasped. *She looks... like Tsunami*.

With white hair flowing behind her, wearing a *kariginu* (hunting robe), pale pink *hakama*, and a translucent silk veil over her head, the girl smiled brightly as their eyes met.

"You finally found me."

"Who... who are you!?" No, her hair color and eyes were different. Her features were much younger, and she wasn't wearing Juraian attire. Yet, why did she look like Tsunami—the guardian of Jurai he had met only once, the goddess who had saved his life?

"Who are you... what is your name?"

The girl smiled again and shook her head slightly. "I've forgotten it already. I've lived in the interval between reality and illusion for so long. Even I don't know if I was a person or a cherry blossom long ago."

She descended without a sound, like a petal leaving a branch, and landed before him. "The interval between heaven and earth... the interval between night and day, the interval between the world of the living and the world of the dead, shifting through the interval between birth and death... that is my form." As she smiled, her snow-like skin seemed to glow white. "Some have called me a *tennyo* (celestial maiden)."

"A *tennyo*..." Tenchi felt a fear he'd never known and involuntarily stepped back.

"There is no need to fear," the girl's white hair danced in the wind. "I only wanted to see the flowers with you. The flowers that bloom in the interval between reality and dreams..."

She let her silk veil fall to the grass and began to dance slowly.

Strangers and friends of flowers alike, Whether we know or do not know, in the shadows of the flowers, Becoming accustomed to them before we know it, our flowery sleeves Brushing against the tree, Shall we stop and gaze?

As the clear voice sang and the girl danced, the blooming cherry blossoms glittered even more white.

"Look. The light is fading."

When Tenchi looked up, the light of the sky was thinning as if time were shifting, and darkness like flowing ink was creeping in from the edges. *Is it already that time of day...?* Tenchi thought idly, then shuddered as he realized the meaning of his own thought. *I couldn't have been with this girl for even an*

hour. And yet, darkness is already approaching... Where is this!? What time is it!?

Since it's a dream—because I'm in a dream—it's not strange if it becomes night or morning in the next moment. It's not strange to encounter a place I recognize even though I've never been there, or to return to the distant past. But, if it isn't a dream!? What if I've crossed the border between reality and a dream without knowing, and wandered into an unknown place?

Feeling as if the cherry blossoms were melting away into the shadows behind him, Tenchi turned around. Simultaneously, the flowers around the girl laughed in unison. Even without wind or sound, the flowers opened their tiny mouths and laughed, layers of petals trembling together.

"Are you afraid?" The girl turned serious and looked up at Tenchi sadly. "What you see is what your heart is showing you. If you are that afraid, you can no longer see the truth."

The girl lowered her face, her brows clouded, and stepped away from him.

"Actually, I came to tell you..." A faintly glowing hand reached down and picked up her robe. She covered her head with her veil just as she had when they met and smiled, like a fading sun. "Goodbye, Tenchi. When you wake up, you will have forgotten everything. Everything is in the interval of a dream..."

Tap, tap—the girl's bare feet stepped on invisible stairs and ascended into the sky. At the same time, her figure began to fade.

"Wait!" Tenchi shouted. An indescribable anxiety tightened his chest. "Wait! You know about me, don't you? What did you come to tell me!?"

The girl stopped and looked back. "Long ago... drawn by the scent of cherry blossoms, a maiden descended to the earth. And under the flowers, she met a man..." She smiled as if nostalgic. "At that time, the maiden promised: 'I am one who dwells in the interval of heaven and earth, one who comes and goes freely through the interval of time. If there is a change in your fate, I shall come to tell you.'"

Suddenly, a gust of wind rose. It shook the girl's robes, whipped up her white hair, and made the petals dance. Beneath a sky that was increasingly overcome

by dusk, the petals danced as if to highlight the brevity of life, falling in disarray at Tenchi's feet.

"Listen well. Dreams will eventually wake, and reality will sink into dreams. From now on, what you will gain and what you will lose, even I do not know. I only felt it: that a great change is coming to you..."

At that moment, the dream shattered, and Tenchi was pulled back into the world of reality.

"Tenchi-sama! Tenchi-sama!?"

Opening his eyes slowly, Ayeka’s face was right in front of him.

"Huh...?"

"Tenchi-niichan!" Sasami’s worried face peeked out from behind Ayeka.

"Are you okay? You were having such a bad nightmare."

"Me?" Tenchi slowly sat up and shook his head. "I had a dream... that cherry blossoms were blooming."

"Cherry blossoms?" Ayeka frowned and touched Tenchi’s forehead with concern. "You seem hot... Oh no! Tenchi-sama, you have a fever!"

"Eh?" Tenchi suddenly felt a chill and shivered.

"T-this is terrible! What should we do!? I need medicine right away... no, a doctor is the priority!"

"A-Ayeka-san, I... it’s nothing serious, really." Seeing Ayeka in a panic, Tenchi jumped up. "Look, see? I'm fine..."

Immediately, dizziness hit him, and he sank back onto the bed. "Ugh... my head hurts."

"Tenchi-sama, are you suffering? Sasami, what should we do!?" Ayeka looked back at Sasami, her own face on the verge of tears.

"Ayeka-oneechan, bring the thermometer. And ice, towels, and a water pillow!"

"Y-yes!" Ayeka flew out of the room and clattered down the stairs.

"Tenchi-niichan, are you okay? Does your head hurt? Here, you have to stay in bed." Sasami efficiently tucked him in, straightened the futon, and scanned the room. "I'll turn on the air conditioner." *Beep*—a command flew from the remote. "I'll make some rice porridge. Do you think you can eat? Is there anything you want to eat?"

"Sorry about this, Sasami-chan."

Tenchi looked up at his little "mother" with a mixture of relief and embarrassment.

"What time is it now?"

"A little past six. Tenchi-niichan, you've been sleeping the whole time."

"I see... Where's Ryoko?"

"She said she was going out to play somewhere, and she hasn't come back yet."

"What a fool, in this cold weather... she'll catch a cold."

Tenchi suddenly realized his own state. "Sasami-chan, you should go. If you stay this close, you'll catch my cold."

"Eh, me? I'm fine. Even when my class was shut down for the flu, I didn't catch it."

"But still..."

"Hey! Tenchi-niichan, you're the patient, right? Patients have to listen to the nurse—just kidding!"

Sasami laughed brightly, then clapped her hands as if she'd remembered something. "That's right... a nurse! Tenchi-niichan, wait a second. I'm going to go ask Washu-chan."

"Ah, wait, Sasami-chan!?"

Tenchi imagined Washu wearing a white coat and a nurse’s cap with a red cross on it, and he felt a chill that had nothing to do with his fever. "She left..." he muttered, feeling helpless.

Oh well... he thought. *I haven't caught a cold in forever. Maybe it was a mistake to walk around in those crowds yesterday.*

"What are you doing, Tenchi?"

A voice drifted down from the ceiling, and Tenchi jolted, twisting his head to look. Ryoko’s head was poking out from the air conditioner.

"R-Ryoko! Why do you always...?"

"Are you waiting for me, maybe?" Ryoko grinned and slipped out of the AC unit. Before he knew it, she had slid right next to him on the bed. "I see, I see. You were waiting for me, huh? Tenchi, you really are... so cute!"

Ryoko laughed as she squeezed him in a tight hug.

"S-stop it, Ryoko!"

"It's fine, it's fine. Leave everything to Ryoko-sama. Now, let’s dock your hot heart with my burning heart. Hmmm!?"

Ryoko sat up, looking suspicious, and placed a cool hand on Tenchi's forehead. "Hey, aren't you a bit weird?"

"Listen, Ryoko. I have a cold. If you don't get out of this futon, I'm really going to give it to you!"

"A cold!?" Ryoko burst into uproarious laughter. "You have a cold? That’s great. They say idiots don't catch colds. I guess you’ve finally got a bit of brains in that head of yours..."

"The idiot is you!"

Thud. A dull sound echoed. Ayeka, eyes narrowed in rage, had brought a frozen ice pack down on Ryoko’s head.

"Get out of here immediately, you indecent woman! Tenchi-sama is ill. Having someone like you nearby will only make his condition worse!"

"Ayeka, you bastard..." Ryoko pressed the back of her head and slid out of the bed. "You asked for it! I'll pay you back a million times over!!"

A pale blue light orb appeared in her hand. "Take this!!"

"What do you think you're doing!!" Ayeka's barrier caught Ryoko's aura energy with a sharp crack.

"Can't you be useful to someone even once!?"

"R-Ryoko... Ayeka-san..." Tenchi dodged flying ice, a washbasin, and a kettle lid. "Time to escape," he whispered, crawling off the bed and beginning to belly-crawl toward the door.

"What is this... Sister!!"

A voice full of utter exasperation rang out, and the two women froze instantly.

"What on earth are you two doing!? Why are you fighting in a place like this!?"

Tenchi looked up to see an enraged Sasami standing at the door with her hands on her hips. "Ugh, the room is a total mess. Tenchi-niichan is sick. If you keep acting like this, he'll never get better!"

Sasami noticed the empty bed and looked around. "Huh? Where's Tenchi-niichan?"

"H-hey." Tenchi and Sasami locked eyes on the floor.

"Tenchi-niichan! What are you doing down there?"

"I thought as much," Washu appeared at the door, smiling cheerily. "Tenchi-dono, I heard you caught a cold~?"

She's here...!

And she was in a nurse's outfit. A chill ran down Tenchi's spine again.

"Poor thing... but it's alright. This galaxy's greatest genius, Washu-chan, will have you back to health in no time." Washu's smile turned into a leer, and she looked like she might start drooling. "Come, come to the lab!" She reached for Tenchi's hand, as gentle as a knight rescuing a princess.

"Wait a second!!" Ryoko, who had been frozen, zoomed in. "Washu, you bastard, stop thinking about something nasty!"

"What, Ryoko-chan? Who's being nasty!?" Washu instantly transformed into a "just scientist."

"I mean, you know, weird medicine, machines, and stuff..."

The world's greatest genius laughed off Ryoko with a scoff. "Quiet! I was just thinking of Tenchi-dono and bringing some panacea I just finished..."

"I'll take regular cold medicine, thanks!"

Tenchi intervened just in time. The patient, now suffering from a headache, fever, and a runny nose, wobbled as he stood and collapsed back onto the bed.

"Tenchi-sama!"

"Tenchi-niichan!?"

As Ayeka and Sasami rushed over, pale with worry, another voice came from the door.

"Tenchi-san, the porridge is ready. Would you like to eat it here?"

George, wearing an apron, stood there, with Ryo-Ohki and a calico kitten peeking out from behind his feet. The kitten, seeing the ice scattered across the floor, jumped in with joy to play.

"George-san, sorry..."

The former-freeter-turned-robot-secretary-and-butler, who carried the burden of the Masaki household's common sense, understood everything with that one quiet apology.

"Please, wait a moment."

After a while, George returned with a dinner tray. He began tidying the room efficiently and gathered up everyone—including his master—who might interfere with the patient's recovery, ushering them all out the door.

"Everyone. If you don't mind, I will take care of the patient. After all, I am a robot, so there is no risk of me becoming a carrier for the influenza virus... Now, if you'll excuse me."

George handed a bucket and a rag to Ayeka, passed the kitten to Sasami, and closed the door with a smile.

"Thanks—you saved me." Tenchi, left alone with the quiet robot, felt relieved as he picked up his chopsticks.

"You are very welcome. Please, eat slowly."

A peaceful moment passed.

"George-san, can I ask you something?"

"Yes, what is it?" The silver robot raised his head while keeping his fingers clasped.

"Well... do you think I'm pathetic?"

Seeing George tilt his head slightly, Tenchi hurriedly added, "I mean, when you think about it, I don't do anything. I don't study, I don't have some grand dream, I'm not taking over for Grandpa... I just got to thinking. What am I even doing?"

"You are working in the fields, aren't you?" George smiled. "What is bothering you so much?"

"I just wonder... is it okay for me to be this happy?" Tenchi felt ashamed of his own words and offered a bitter smile. "I'm not doing anything special. I'm just uneasy. Every time I think about when this happiness might break..."

"Tenchi-san, did something happen?"

"No..." George looked at him with concern, but didn't press the issue.

"Isn't that fine?"

"Eh?" Tenchi looked up at the unexpected response.

"Doing what you can at each moment, and letting the day pass like that. Isn't that what human happiness is? I am a robot, but I am quite happy just like this. Blessed with a good master and a good family, I could ask for nothing more."

Tenchi stared back at George's calm face, as if struck by a revelation. "Yeah, you're right. You're absolutely right, George-san. But..."

"Tenchi-san, you are a kind-hearted person," George smiled again. "But I know. I know there is a powerful strength hidden within you, Tenchi-san. When the time comes, you just have to fight. Haven't you done that until now?"

"Yeah..." Tenchi looked down, hesitating, and remained silent for a long time. "You're right... I should stop thinking about myself and just think about the people who are important to me."

George watched the troubled young prince with a serene smile.

"Now, it is time for the patient to sleep. If we talk too much, the others outside the door will get angry." George cleared the dishes, smoothed the futon, and opened the door.

"Tenchi-niichan!" Sasami's worried face was the first to peek in. "Were you able to eat? Does your head still hurt?"

"I apologize for earlier," Ayeka followed, looking in timidly. "We won't disturb you anymore, so please rest well."

"Tsk. And I was planning on sleeping next to you," Ryoko muttered as she pushed Ayeka's head down.

"Tenchi-dono, as I recall, humans need immunity. This is just regular cold medicine, so take it without worry." Washu threw a bottle of medicine underhand to him.

"What, I wouldn't have minded the panacea, you know." Tenchi caught the bottle with a laugh.

"Don't underestimate a genius. If you take that, you might transform into something weird tomorrow. Like a bluefin tuna." George looked back at Tenchi and nodded with a straight face.

"What a terrible butler. I don't even know why I hire such a nasty robot," Washu laughed, waving her hand and shoving the lingering visitors away.

"Tenchi-dono, I'll make a prediction. You won't be able to step one foot out of this house for the next three days."

"Take care, Tenchi-sama."

"Get well soon, Tenchi-niichan."

The visitors were pushed out, their heads stretching back as they tried to get one last look. The door closed, the sound of footsteps fading down the stairs until it was finally quiet. Tenchi took the prescribed medicine and lay down.

His physical state was still terrible, but his heart felt warm and full.

"It's okay. To be happy..."

Plus, this happiness would last for three more days. As he closed his eyes, cherry blossoms danced behind his eyelids. The blossoms shimmered in a pale white light, melting into the interval between the dream and the reality.

No matter what happens from here on out, I will protect this happiness...!

As he drifted off into sleep, he felt as if the girl's white face had turned toward him from beyond the darkness. The girl nodded at Tenchi, reached out with both hands toward the scattering petals, and vanished, glowing faintly like a spirit tracing its path to the underworld.

Afterword

Thank you to everyone who continues to support the "Tenchi" series. This twelfth book, following the previous volume's "Family Safety Arc," is once again a short story collection.

Speaking of twelve, that's one dozen. If it were sweets, you could divide them among three or four people without a fight. Though, if you tried to divide them among the ten members of the Tenchi family—plus George, the secretary/butler, making eleven—I have a feeling Ryoko would swoop in and snatch the last one. Regardless, the fact that I've been able to keep writing this far is entirely due to your support. As an author, I feel deeply that "thank you" is never enough, no matter how many times I say it.

Looking back, having written these short stories—while sandwiching a long-form story in between—I suddenly realize that Ryoko and Ayeka have completely settled into life on Earth. It's not just that they've gotten used to it; they have formed a family, a relationship where they clash but also forgive and compromise with one another. Isn't that, in itself, a form of growth?

Thinking back, when Ayeka first landed on Earth, she knew nothing of life on this planet. Sasami wouldn't leave her sister's side. Ryoko had only Tenchi on her mind, and Mihoshi and Kiyone were just guests. Now, Sasami attends a local elementary school; Mihoshi and Kiyone live independently while working part-time; and everyone gathers to celebrate New Year's, go cherry blossom viewing, decorate for Tanabata, and celebrate Christmas.

I've even built a map of the Masaki house and a floor plan of the family's living space in my head. Ayeka's room is on the second floor, but during the day, she is usually in the living room downstairs. Perhaps due to the strict upbringing of the Juraian Royal Family, Ayeka, who dislikes untidiness, straightens bent cushions in passing and neatly folds newspapers left out, placing them on the side table. It's in her nature to tidy up everything within sight, and since she tends to the potted plants with the same care, the Masaki house is never without flowers. However, the parts of her second-floor room that aren't visible are surprisingly cluttered. Sasami, knowing her sister's meticulous nature well, has the special talent of quickly cleaning up her own messes before Ayeka's mood turns sour.

Ryoko, on the other hand, gives no consideration to such things. She skips half of her household chores, sleeps when she wants, and disappears when she wants to. That she now clears away her own dishes can be called a huge leap forward. Mihoshi and Kiyone used to be a "person who makes a mess" and "person who cleans up" duo, but since they moved out of the Masaki house, that dynamic has carried over to their own apartment.

The ones whose lifestyle habits haven't changed at all are Washu and Katsuhito. Since they each have their own place outside the Masaki house's floor plan, they can live independently without infringing on others' territory. Tenchi and Nobuyuki are originally people of this house, so there's no problem with where they belong—or where they can escape to. As for lifestyle habits, Tenchi has stopped his student life, but Nobuyuki has his job, so things are mostly the same.

However, the one who is most considerate of others and holds back the most is undoubtedly Tenchi-kun. There is an aerial hot spring, but only one washroom and (presumably) two restrooms. It's Tenchi-kun who lets others go first. Even so, the Masaki house is wide, like a model home, and inside it is Washu's even wider laboratory in another dimension... as an author, I'm envious.

And so, thanks to persistently writing about the daily life of the Masaki house, I feel like I know their lifestyle as well as I know my neighbors, even if I don't write all of it in the works. Of course, because they are my "neighbors," there are parts that remain unseen, which serves as the spark for "what story should I write next?" If you can feel the air of their casual lives—a discarded mandarin orange peel behind the trash can in the living room, the good smell of miso soup drifting from the kitchen, a squabble over where to put the stray kitten's food bowl... I would be very happy. Why? Because they are living there.

Now, a word on behalf of our guest characters this time. Shion, the star singer who stole Kiyone's heart, is the youngest of three brothers. The oldest brother is... if I must tell, it's Professor Taiki, the minder for Fuka-chan! Incidentally, the second brother is named Mao, and he is a top-class fashion model. They are a family of beautiful men that would put a shojo manga to shame. Professor Taiki seems to have some secret pleasures he can't tell people about, but I wonder if those traits haven't been passed down to the other brothers. They probably wouldn't tell me anyway, but I should have asked.

I based the "Momijigari" (Autumn Leaf Viewing) story on the Noh play of the same name. The original play is a lively, dazzling, and spectacular action piece appropriate for the autumn leaf season. The demon woman who tries to devour Taira no Koremochi appears in a vivid, crimson maple-patterned *karaori* costume. Even so, the Japanese of Noh plays is deep, shaded, and beautiful. It's strange, since I wasn't particularly fond of classical literature when I was a student.

Misoka-chan, the kitten who became a new member of the Masaki house in *Katsura-Usa*, is actually modeled after the kitten I have at home. It’s a calico, and her name is PIKA. My existing cat wasn't as patient as Ryo-Ohki, so there was quite a bit of drama before they settled down. Now, they are good friends, just like Ryo-Ohki and Misoka-chan.

In the serialized version, the cherry blossom season returns to the Masaki house once again. At the same time, a certain premonition arrives. The seasons turn, and the fates of Tenchi and the others are beginning to turn as well. Please look forward to the destination of their respective feelings and the passing seasons...

In a workspace made even more cluttered by two cats,

Naoko Hasegawa